



level. 14++
If I Could Meet You Again

Grimgar of Fantasy Ash

Presented by
AO JYUMONJI
Illustration by
EIRI SHIRAI

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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash

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Written by: Ao Jyumonji

Illustrations by: Eiri Shirai



"I've thought about it but, yeah... we're going to split it all evenly."

"Gwehehehehe! With 5 gold, the world's my oyster! Here it is; at last, my time has come....!"

"We all know you'll waste it on something stupid..."

Uneventful days, irreplaceable moments.

**“Soruzo is
delicious!
This is the
best!”**



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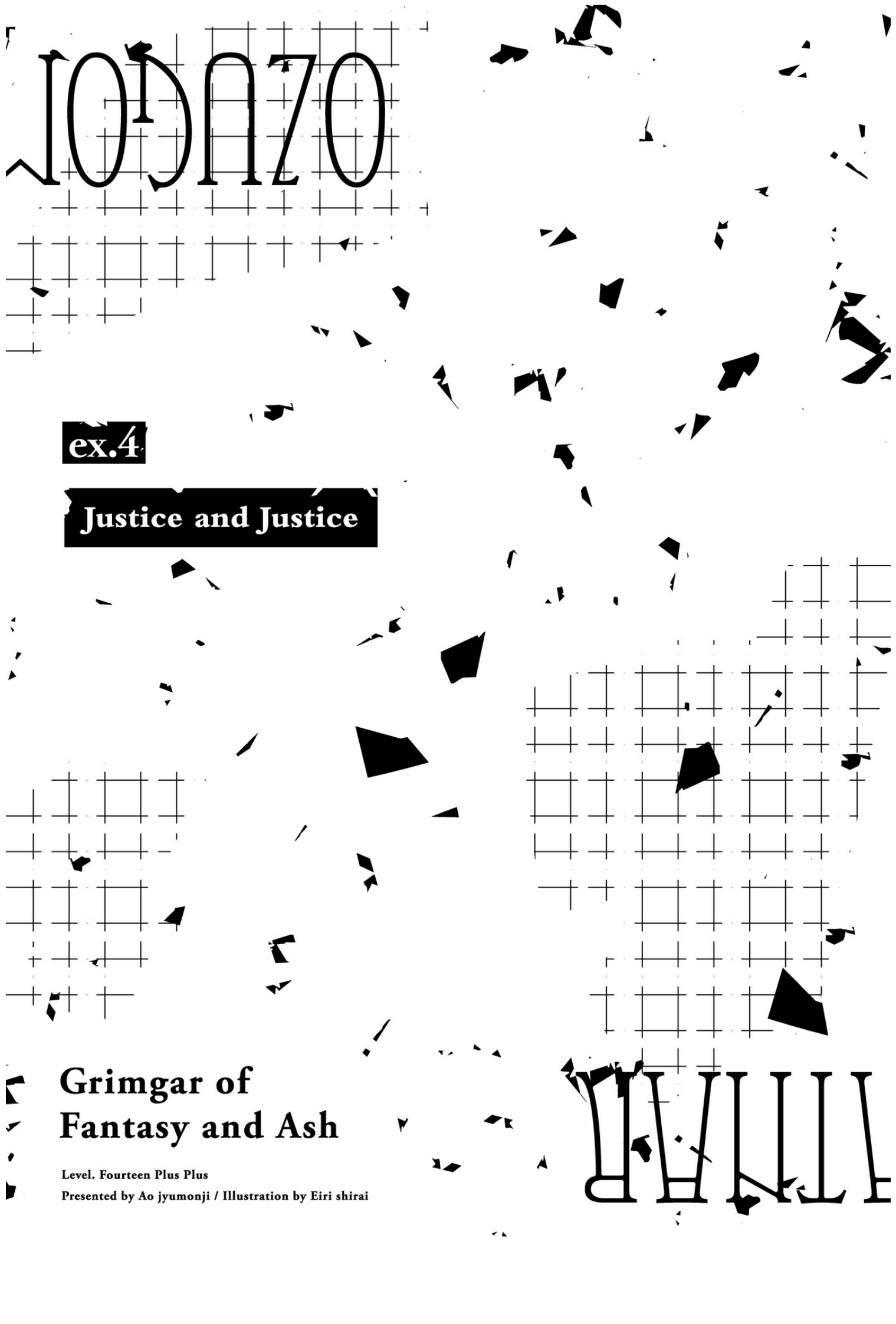
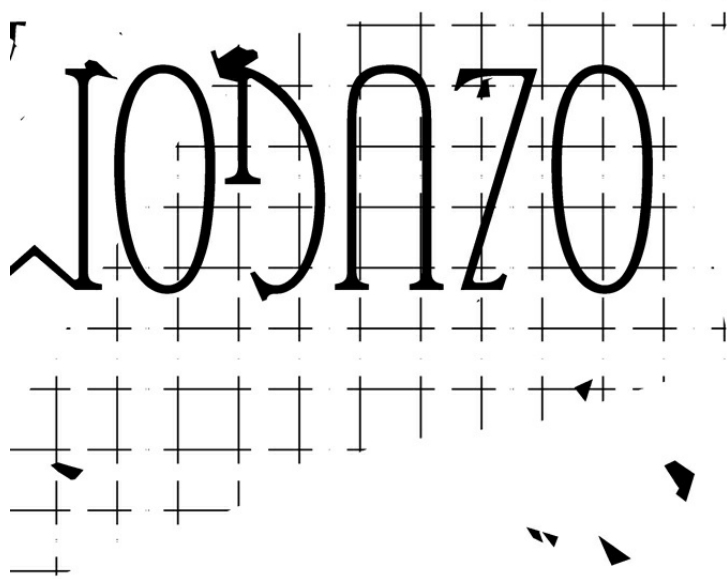
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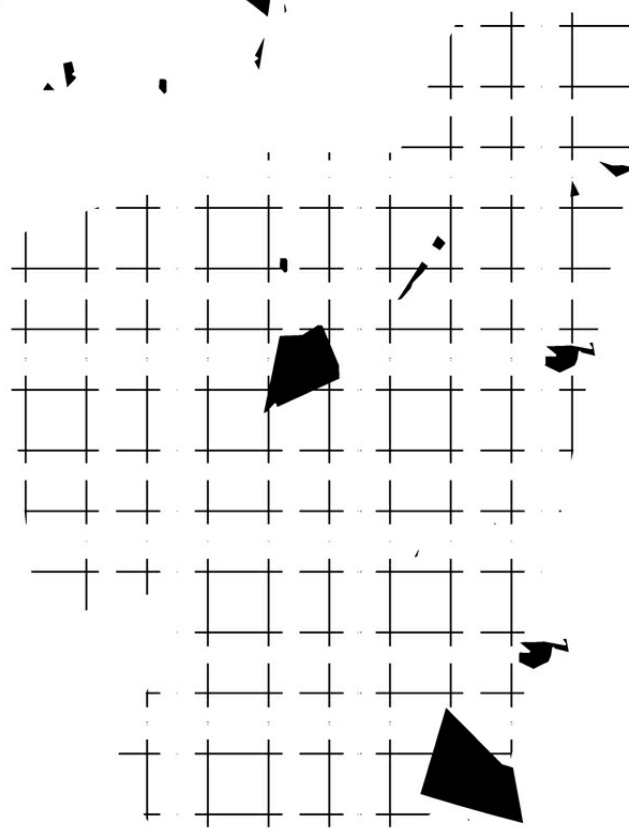
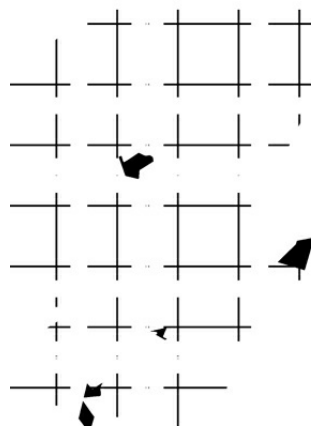
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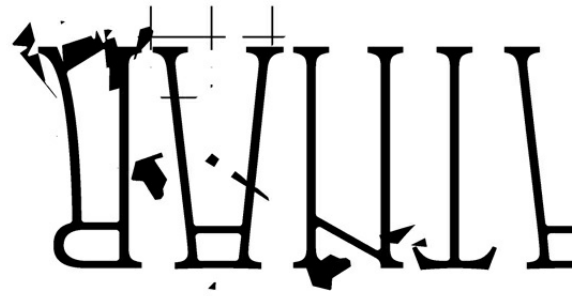
ex.4

Justice and Justice



Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash

Level. Fourteen Plus Plus
Presented by Ao jyumonji / Illustration by Eiri shirai



1. A Decision Between Men

“Moguzo, man.”

“Huh?”

It happened while Moguzo was in the middle of scooping some sort of soup into a small dish for taste-testing. His hands stopped moving, and he looked towards Ranta who was near the entrance to the cooking area.

“Wh-What? Ranta-kun...”

“Don’t you think you’ve been getting a bit cocky?”

“C-Cocky...? N-No, I don’t... think so.”

“Nah, man. You’re getting cocky. That’s what’s happening. It’s me saying it, so it must be true. Me, the great Ranta-sama!”

“Wh-What makes you think... that? If you could tell me, I’ll try to fix it.”

“There it is,” Ranta said, pointing at Moguzo’s hands, “There! That’s what I mean when I say you’re acting cocky!”

“Wh-Where...?”

“The way you’re holding it! It shouts, ‘I can cook!’ It’s a total cooking-boy gesture. It’s like, ‘Give me all your affection points!’ That’s what I’m calling cocky!”

“...Uhh. R-Really...? I’m just making food here.”

“‘This is easy for me,’ is it? ‘I’m not like the rest of you’? I can feel that oozing from the way you act, and, frankly, it comes across as spiteful!”

“S-Sorry. I’ll be more careful.”

“Hah! Talk is easy.”

“...I really will be careful. Um, can I keep cooking? I’m not done yet.”

“Why not keep at it? I never said one word about you stopping, you know?”

“Y-Yeah. Well then...”

Moguzo took another ladle of soup, tested the taste, then nodded.

“Keh...” Ranta spat in distaste. “You’ve got this look on your face like you think you’re so special.”

“I do not, okay?”

“You so do. Only reason you don’t realize it is you can’t see your own face.”

“...I-It tasted pretty good, so maybe that’s why?”

“Seriously? That’s it?”

“P-Probably...”

Chop, chop, chop, Moguzo used a knife to dice up something that looked like tea leaves and added them to the soup. There was a smile on his steam-bathed face. Ranta clicked his tongue.

“You did it again!”

“D-Did what...?”

“That, ‘I did good,’ face.”

“Huh? No, it just turned out like I thought, that’s all...”

“Man, aren’t you misunderstanding here?”

“M-Misunderstanding...?”

“Let me tell you, Moguzo, I could do exactly what you’re doing now, okay? I’m just not. You’re always offering to take my shift, so I’m doing you a favor by letting you have it!”

“I-I like cooking, so it’s not hard on me...”

“Wrong! That’s not what’s up with you! There’s more to it! You’re clearly in this to show off how wonderful you are for being able to cook! You want to raise your own value and, if you’re lucky, make girls like you while you’re at it!”

“O-Okay, I won’t take your shift anymore then.”

“You dolt!”

“Wha...”

“Moguzo! Who will take my shift if not you?! Okay, maybe Manato’d do it if I asked him to, but I don’t want to have to go out of my way to ask! You can take my shift! That’s not what this is about!”

“...Wh-What is it about?”

“Cooking!”

Ranta flexed his biceps, and patted the raised lump.

“I’m no less of a cook than you, and I want you to understand that! I can do it if I want to, man! I just don’t!”

“S-Sure... I got it. I’ll remember that. Okay?”

“Yeah. Remember it good.”

Ranta sniffed the air.

He was hungry.

“...Smells nice.”

“D-Do you think? Um... Would you like to try it?”

“If you insist, I don’t mind trying it for you.”

Ranta squared his shoulders as he walked over to stand next to Moguzo. Taking the little dish Moguzo offered him, he took a sip of soup.

His eyes widened.

“Th... This is... This rich scent... The exquisite balance between depth of flavor and a clean aftertaste. The amount of salt is perfect, too. It’s not too much, and yet doesn’t feel insubstantial, either... Moguzo!”

“Wh-What...?”

“Moguzo, man...!”

Ranta threw an arm around Moguzo’s shoulders.

“You really can cook! This is the best! Damn, I want more! I want to drink it all right now! I don’t want to let anyone else have any! I wanna eat all the solid ingredients, too!”

“Ah, haha... Th-That’s a bit much.”

“—Whoa, hold up!”

“Wh-What?”

“Just now, your nostrils flared!”

“No, I don’t think so...” Moguzo hurriedly hid his nose behind his hands.

Ranta smirked. “Now you’ve done it, Moguzo. I saw you! I totally did! I didn’t miss it! That smug, self-satisfied look on your face...!”

“I-I really didn’t mean to...”

“It’s fine, man. Totally fine.”

“Huh...?”

“Moguzo, you’re good at cooking. Where’s the harm in being proud of that? Me, I’m talking how it’s downright indecent the way that, despite that, you act all humble, all modest. It’s fine. Use your talent for cooking to show how wonderful you are! Go for it! Your value will shoot right up! Make women love you! Aim for a harem! That’s what you really want, right? Then don’t hide it! Be honest. Am I right?”

“...You’re wrong.”

“Huh?”

“You’re wrong. I’m not thinking about any of that stuff... I mean it. I just wanted everyone to be able to eat a little bit better. I wanted to see everyone happy...”

“Gappiin!”

“...Gappin?”

“Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Ranta jumped backwards, reared back, and began dancing.

“Piiin!”

“...Huh? Whuh? Wh-What’s going on, Ranta... -kun?”

“Boom! Crash!”

“No, hold on, I don’t unders—”

“Hey, Moguzo, touch me here. Right here.” Ranta stood tall, pointing at his throat.

Moguzo hesitantly poked at Ranta’s neck. “...Here?”

“There! That’s where my scales are...!”

Ranta jumped back again, and jabbed his index finger towards Moguzo.

“You just rubbed them the wrong way! You did...!”

“Whaa... Y-You have scales, Ranta-kun...?”

“You damn well bet I do! You just touched them with your own bare hands! I felt you rubbing them the wrong way!”

“Your... scales?”

“I won’t let you say I don’t have them! Not after you went and touched them all over!”

“I barely even touched—”

“Is that an excuse?! An explanation?! A justification?! Are you seeking vindication?! Or indignation?!”

“I-I have no clue what you’re even talking about now...”

“Don’t worry! Because it doesn’t make any sense to me, either! I know it’s weird for me to be the one to say this, but this stuff happens in life! Am I right?!”

“I-I don’t know how to respond when you say, ‘Am I right?!’ like that...”

“Am I right?!”

“S-Sure...”

“So, anyway! Now that it’s come to this, there’s no way to end this peaceably! Because you literally rubbed me the wrong way! We’ve got to settle this! Face me, Moguzo...!”

“Fa... Face you? At what...?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Ranta shouted as he spread his arms, “In a serious cooking battle! *Allez cuisine!*”



2. Gratitude and Reason

“Hey, big guy, you’ll do.”

He still regretted that when Kuzuoka, a man wearing a feathered hat, had said that to him in the Volunteer Soldier Corps Office, he hadn’t given him a firm refusal.

Kuzuoka had looked like a good guy—not. He was the opposite. He had the face of a bully, and a foul mouth to match. Kuzuoka had said he’d teach him all sorts of things, and he’d even lend him money, but honestly, Moguzo had thought that was just talk. Still, he didn’t refuse.

In fact, the option of refusing never entered his head to begin with.

In some corner of his head, he’d known that things were leading in a less-than-good direction from the beginning. He knew going with Kuzuoka had to be a mistake. Yet, in spite of that, Moguzo could do nothing but let things run their course.

He did as Kuzuoka told him, going to the warriors’ guild, paying eight silver, and attending the beginners’ camp. There, he was run ragged by a female tutor named Komo, who wore a leather bikini bottom and a leather strap for a top—an obvious sign she was a pervert. When he called her “tutor,” she got mad, saying, “It’s Komo-san! Call me Komo-san!” Even now, he didn’t know what that was about. Komo-san was very fiery, strong, and weird.

He had lost count of the number of times he sighed, thinking, *I’m not cut out for this*, during the seven-day training camp. Swinging around a big sword was one thing, but hitting something with it—hurting, destroying, killing—just didn’t sit right with him. He had done a lot of practice using a wooden sword on a wooden dummy at the warriors’ guild, but even against a non-living opponent, it hadn’t felt good. He couldn’t help but think, *Why do I have to do this? Isn’t there something more important I should be doing? I may be blowing things out of proportion, but if I have the power to destroy something, it would be better to use it to create something. That would be more constructive.* When those thoughts passed through his head, it killed any enthusiasm he had for it.

And Komo-san gave him hell over that.

“Moguzo! You worm! What if your comrades get killed while you’re dawdling?! Your indecision will kill your own allies! Kill before you’re killed! That’s a hard-and-fast rule on the battlefield!”

Maybe I’d be better off in a place where I don’t have to kill or be killed?

“Moguzo! You just doubted your reason for fighting, didn’t you?! You fool! First comes the battle! The reason comes after that!”

He didn’t accept that. He couldn’t possibly fight a battle with no cause. If possible, he didn’t want to fight at all. Not only did he not want to wield a sword, he didn’t want to face one, either.

He hated it so, so, so, so, so, so, so, so much, but when she told him, “Do it,” his body moved on its own. He swung the wooden sword as commanded, and struck the dummy. “Too weak,” she would shout, and he’d swing harder. Even when he collapsed from exhaustion, if she kicked him in the butt, he’d get back up.

“You’re going to die like this, Moguzo! That, or get your comrades killed! Are you okay with that?!”

In response to those harsh words, he shouted back, “No, I’m not!”

He had no will of his own.

In the end, that’s what it was that time, too.

With the beginners’ camp behind him, he finally joined Kuzuoka’s party as a warrior. As a test of sorts, they decided he would have a match with the party’s dread knight, or paladin, or something like that, just outside the north gate. Not with wooden swords. This was a practice match, but it was still to be done with real swords. *There’s no way I could do that*, he thought. But when they told him, “Do it,” he couldn’t refuse. He was beaten down in an instant, and Kuzuoka spat on him.

“Damn, you’re useless. I shouldn’t have wasted my time waiting. It’s a huge loss. So, pay up. Money. I want money. Give me all your money. We’ll call it even then. Come on, hurry it up.”

He knew there had to be something wrong with him, just willingly turning over all his money. But he couldn't push back. He'd be in trouble without money, and he obviously didn't want to do it, but he couldn't find the will to resist.

If Manato and his party hadn't come by after that, who knows what would have happened to him. No, before that, what had Moguzo himself intended to do about it?

He couldn't imagine. He hadn't thought about it at all. He might have stayed there, sitting at the side of the road just outside the north gate, without a single thought occurring to him.

Manato, Haruhiro, Yume, Shihoru, and Ranta had saved Moguzo. He owed the five of them a debt of gratitude. If there was something that even he could do for them, he wanted to do it. He had to. He was, technically, a warrior, so he'd fight for all of them as hard as he could.

That, and cook.

He'd make food for everyone.

In fact, he had a bit of confidence in that field.

When they faced goblins, even as he mentally shouted, *Fight, you've got to fight*, at himself, he had no idea what to do, or how to do it, and his body wouldn't move. He couldn't fight without thinking, *I'm gonna do this. What do I do? I know. I should do this*, and going over every little detail. Because of that, he was always a step behind.

With cooking, it was different.

This is the kind of thing I want to make, or, That's what I want to make—the ideas came to him easily. If he bought something at a stall, he could more or less figure out the ingredients, and how it was flavored. If he just had the materials, with a little trial and error, he could recreate almost any dish.

"...Have I been letting that go to my head?"

Moguzo stood in the middle of the volunteer soldier lodging house's yard, hanging his head.

“And Ranta-kun saw through it... Is that what happened?”

“Moguzo?”

“Huh...?”

When Moguzo looked up, Manato was right next to him, looking at him with his head cocked to the side.

“Oh... M-Manato-kun.”

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“No, uh, well... N-Not really. I can’t say... anything... didn’t, though...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Manato asked with a chuckle, then sat down next to Moguzo, “It looks to me like something did happen. Why not tell me about it, if you don’t mind? Sometimes, just putting whatever’s bothering you into words can make it easier to cope with.”

“Th-That makes sense. Sure...”

Moguzo sighed and rubbed his own chest. It didn’t help the words come out any easier, though.

“I don’t mind,” Manato said in an easygoing tone of voice, “If you can’t talk about it, you don’t have to. There’s no need to force yourself.”

“R-Ranta-kun was...!”

Suddenly, something burst out of his throat, and he was surprised to find out it was his own voice. That’s how it felt.

“R-Ranta-kun, he, um... I don’t know how to put it. H-He challenged me to a contest. So...”

“Oh, yeah? What kind of contest?”

“It was... c-cooking.”

“Well, you’ll win that one. The match is decided before it even begins.”

“H-Huh? No, y-you can’t say that until it happens...”

“I mean, Ranta’s never even cooked a proper meal, I’ll bet. He’s not good at peeling, or cutting things up.”

“H-He’s kind of haphazard, you know? Ranta-kun, I mean. He’s not good at being thorough...”

“Sloppy. That’s what Ranta is. He’ll try to cut every corner he can.”

“I know, right? ...B-But that’s not how cooking works. Nothing is without purpose. Oh, and whether or not you put your heart into it makes a very clear difference.”

“Ranta’s the type who follows his whims and does things efficiently.”

“Th-That’s no good, though. I mean, I don’t know if I should be saying it’s no good. It may be fine with other things, but with cooking, by actually putting the time and effort in, you get a completely different result. In fact, that all builds up to—”

“Why not beat him, then?”

“...Huh?”

“You should have the contest in front of everyone, and beat Ranta into the ground.”

When Manato said something like that with a refreshing smile, for a moment, Moguzo didn’t understand.

“It’s okay. No matter how things play out, it won’t feel awkward. I’ll take care of that. I mean, you kind of want to do it, too, right, Moguzo?”

Moguzo’s eyes widened. When Manato said that, for the first time, he realized he did.

“...Y-Yeah.”

3. It’s About How You Live

As Ranta was wandering around in the market, he happened to spot Yume and Shihoru. He could have called out to them, but after thinking about it a bit, he decided he’d rather not.

“...Bah. I dunno why, but they look like they’re having fun. Darn Tiny Tits and Secretly Stacked.”

He did an about-face, and scratched his head with a sigh.

“Can they really get along with such a difference in boobage? I don’t get women. With us guys, that big a size difference would make things awkward. Even if we kept up appearances on the surface, deep down, I’d be thinking, ‘But, man, you’ve got a small one... Pfft!’ Well, not that we have that dramatic a difference in the size of our members...”

As he mumbled to himself, he glanced at the ingredients lining the shelves of the shops and stalls.

In general, perishables were expensive, while things that kept were priced more cheaply.

“What’ll I do? Hmm. Cooking. Cooking... Hold on, how did I end up in a cooking battle with Moguzo again...?”

He stopped, crossed his arms, and thought about it.

“The heat of the moment...?”

Well, that was important. It was the same when he became a dread knight, too.

“Okay, so we’re agreed that you’ll be the warrior, Ranta.”

When Manato had said that, before they all joined their respective guilds, Ranta had been in full agreement. He especially liked that the warrior was the centerpiece of the whole party.

You know. They’re gonna need me. They won’t be able to do anything without me. Right, right, right? So, I’m gonna be Ranta-sama to them. Yep, yep.

That was how he thought about it, and he was pretty satisfied.

Why did he not join the warriors’ guild?

At the time, Ranta was in the southern district of Alterna, heading towards the warriors’ guild near the craftsmen’s town. He was over the moon about it.

A warrior, huh? Me, a warrior? A warrior. Warrior. Warriors are cool. I mean, they’re warriors. I bet I’ll be a hit with the ladies. Here comes my time to be popular. There’s no way it’s not coming.

While he was thinking that, humming to himself as he walked, suddenly Manato's words came back to him.

"In addition to warriors, I heard there are two similar jobs, dread knights and paladins, but my thinking is that we should really—"

Dread knight? Paladin?

Oh? Oh, ho, ho, ho? Hmm? Hum, hum, hum? Hold on...

Maybe being one of those would be even more awesome...?

The moment that thought crossed his mind, the option of being a warrior was gone without a trace. *Dread knight, or paladin? Which should I be?* Those were the two choices he was left with.

Do I choose the darkness?

Or maybe the light?

The obvious answer is darkness... Yeah?

I thought so.

Ranta still remembered saying it to himself.

"Dread knight, Ranta. Ranta, dread knight. The dread knight Ranta. The dread knight to end all dread knights, Ranta. Ranta was meant to be a dread knight. The true dread knight is Ranta. Dread Knight Ranta..."

It fit perfectly. Maybe he was born to be a dread knight? Yes. That had to be it.

And so, Dread Knight Ranta was born.

His seven days of dark instruction at the dread knights' guild was harsh, and difficult, but he overcame it, because, uh, if he didn't, he'd be dead, and now he didn't really remember what was involved, but he'd cleared the trials marvelously, and brilliantly, so he had no regrets.

"The heat of the moment... That's important."

Ranta grunted and made a fist.

"In the end, life's all about intuition and the heat of the moment. That means

this competition was meant to be. This event was unavoidable. Yeah. Unavoidable? Or is it inevitable? Meh, whichever. I like it. Because no matter which it is, what I say is always right. Still, though...”

He looked restlessly around the area.

“What do I make...? Moguzo’s a good cook. That’s all he’s good for, though. If I’m gonna beat him at cooking, it’s gonna be hard work. I mean, being me, there’s no way I can’t win, but I’ve got to pick my methods carefully. Hmmm. Nggh...”

Walking as he pondered, he came all the way to the craftsmen’s town in the southern district.

In the area near the craftsmen’s town, there was a village of stalls, mainly busy with craftspeople. The volunteer soldier lodging house was a stone’s throw away, and there were plenty of places to eat and drink here, so Ranta and the others frequently came to fill their stomachs. He knew the place like the back of his hand.

“Ping!”

I’ve got it, he thought, and took off at a run. He rushed towards the village of stalls. He was starting to smell something tasty.

“It’s here! The hint I need! It must be! It has to be...!”

As he ran through the village of stalls, he looked this way, he looked that way. He looked at one thing, he looked at another. All while sniffing with his nose. In the end, Ranta came to a sudden stop in front of one stall.

“This is it...! No doubt about it! The key to my victory’s buried right here! That’s what my instincts are telling me! So! Ru! Zo!

“Wh-What...?”

Inside the stall, the master of the soruzo stand—who had been stirring a pot—was deeply unnerved.

Ranta laughed.

“Heheheheh... Gwahahahaha...! Don’t be so scared! Even if you can’t help but fear the Dread Knight Ranta-sama! I’m not going to eat you or anything!”

“...Are you all right, buddy?”

The master of the soruzo stand had salt-and-pepper hair, and was probably in his fifties. The man had the drum-like belly that you might expect from a lover of soruzo, which was exactly how a soruzo chef should look. It was, incidentally, not meal time right now, so he had no customers. The master had been hard at work preparing.

Ranta cleared his throat and thrust out his chest.

“Of course I’m all right!”

“O-Okay. That’s good, then. ...You’ve been here before a number of times. To my place.”

“Sure have! Because I’m a volunteer soldier! Though I’m just a trainee!”

“You act awfully self-important for a trainee...”

“Heh... You think so, old man? Well, there’s a reason for that. ...It’s probably because I actually *am* important! It just oozes from my every pore, doesn’t it? I’ve got that sort of aura!”

“...I don’t know. I don’t care if you’re important or not, so could you beat it already? I’m busy here.”

“There’s a condition.”

“Y-You’re giving me conditions? Just to go away...?”

“Don’t you worry. You are, of course, free to accept or decline.”

“If I wasn’t, it’d just be a threat, wouldn’t it? No, even with that freedom, it still feels like a threat...”

“It’s nothing major.”

“Let me guess, you’re the type that doesn’t listen to a thing people say to you...”

“Bingo!”

“But you were listening to that?!”

“Well, yeah. —Now, about that condition. Teach me about soruzo. You do

that, and I won't mind leaving. Simple, right?"

4. What Am I Looking For?

As he was walking through the marketplace, something charged into him from behind.

"Ungh!"

"Wah..."

Though he didn't quite pitch forward, he did turn around in surprise, and Yume was there. Yume had tackled him.

"...Yu-Yume-san? Oh...! Shihoru-san, too."

"Meow! Here's Yume!"

As Yume energetically waved her arms around and jumped up and down, Shihoru stood behind her, waving her hand a little more reservedly.

"...H-Hello."

"U-Umm..." Moguzo put a hand on his own chest. They had surprised him pretty badly, so his heart was racing.

"Wh-What's up, you two? A-Are you out shopping, maybe...?"

"Mmm, well, Yume and Shihoru were lookin' around. Right, Shihoru?"

"...Y-Yeah, that's right. We were looking at things..."

"What about you, Moguzo? What're you doin'?"

"Oh, m-me...? Um, I-I'm doing the same thing, I guess? Looking around."

"For food, maybe?"

"Y-Yeah."

"You're a food, after all."

"Huh...?"

"Oops! Yume meant you're a foodie. You're real good at cookin'. Listen, Yume, she's a big fan of food, too. But makin' it, maybe not so much. So, maybe

she should stick to eatin' it."

"S-Sure. Well, um..."

There were times when he couldn't immediately figure out what Yume was trying to say. When that happened, he always had to pause and turn it over in his head a bit.

"...I-I think I like both, maybe? I-I dunno what it is. When I get the flavor I was trying for, it makes me really happy."

"Ohhh..." Shihoru's eyes widened a little, and a look of understanding came to her face.

"Muh?" Yume puffed up one cheek, and poked her jaw with her index finger. "Is it like that thing? Y'know, where you close your eyes, and you try walkin' straight, but when you open your eyes, nyoo, you went crooked? Is that what it feels like?"

"U-Um... I-I dunno. It's a bit different... maybe?"

"It's different, huh."

"Yeah. I'm sorry. Kinda."

"Yume's sorry, too."

"No, I'm sorrier..."

The way the two kept bowing their heads to one another made Shihoru chuckle. When Yume noticed, she cracked a smile, and Moguzo laughed at how silly it all was. The three were all laughing together when, out of the blue, Yume jumped towards Shihoru.

"Gloooomp!"

"Eeeek!"

"Unyaa. Glomp!"

"Hey, Yume, stop..."

"Okay! Yume, she's gonna stop!"

What were the two of them doing? What kind of communication was this?

Moguzo had no clue, but Shihoru didn't seem to actually dislike it, and they looked like they were having fun.

It felt good to see them getting along. *I'm really not cut out to be a warrior*, Moguzo thought. Still, for the sake of the comrades who had let him into their party, he had to be the best warrior he could be. He meant to do that, but once he got so old that he couldn't fight anymore, he thought it might be nice to open a restaurant with his comrades.

"U-Um, so, something happened..."

"Mm-hm, mm-hm. What is it, Moguzo?"

"...For some reason, I'm going to be having a cooking battle with Ranta-kun."

"Ranta-kun's being weird again..." The look of distaste on Shihoru's face made Moguzo smile wryly.

"Sort of, yeah... B-But whatever the reason was, I'll be happy if I can make something delicious to share with everyone."

"Ohhhh. That's the way to be!"

"If possible, I want it to be something I wouldn't make if it weren't for an event like this..."

"...I'll look forward to it."

Shihoru covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes sparkling. From where Moguzo was standing, it looked like Shihoru might be an even bigger glutton than Yume. Yume stood on her tiptoes to bring her face closer to his.

"And, and?"

"...Y-Yeah. And what? I haven't thought of anything yet... which is why I was looking around at ingredients."

"Favor bolds the fortune, y'know!"

"Okay...?"

Moguzo and Shihoru glanced at one another. The look on her face told him not even she could discern what Yume was trying to say. He was just going to have to pretend it made sense.

“Y-Yeah... that’s right?”

“It is, huh? Right, Shihoru?”

“...Huh? S-Sure... I guess?”

“Oh! In that case, Yume’s thinkin’ that Yume, Shihoru, and Moguzo should all look together!”

“You sure you want to? I’d be grateful for it.”

“Of course Yume wants to. And Shihoru does too, right?”

“...Of course. If you don’t mind, Moguzo-kun.”

That was how they ended up looking around the market together. He didn’t get the chance to do this often, so Moguzo tried asking Yume and Shihoru some questions.

“Um, what sort of things do the two of you like?”

“Hmm? Things we like, huh? Let’s see... Yume, she likes wolf dogs!”

“...Yume, he means to eat.”

“Oh? He does? Food, huh? Nnngh. Munngh. Nunuhhh...”

“S-Sorry, Yume-san. For making you think so hard...”

“Nuwah?!”

“Huh...?!”

“Moguchin, you just called Yume Yume-san, didn’t you?!”

“...M-Moguchin?”

“Moguzo?”

“W-Well, I’m fine with either, but, uh... Yeah. I dunno. It feels weird addressing you without an honorific...”

“You think so?”

“It feels overly familiar, I guess.”

“Is it really overtly familial, you think?”

“I-I don’t know about that.”

“Yume’s fine with just Yume, you know? Yumerin’d be okay, too, though. Or Yummy?”

“...Yume. Yummy would be weird, okay...?”

“Unghhh. Okay. Shihoru’s Shihoru, after all. Just Yume’s fine, huh? Maybe Moguzo should be Moguzo, too. I mean, Moguzo’s cute.”

“...Y-You think so?”

Moguzo’s face felt hot. It wasn’t hot outside, but he felt like he was going to break out in a sweat.

“Yep, yep. Yume thinks you’re cute. Shihoru’s cute, too.”

“...I-I don’t think so...”

“You’re cute, okay? Moguzo, you agree, right?”

“Huh? Uh, sure... Yeah. I-I think she’s c-cu...”

Moguzo covered his face with both hands. He felt intensely embarrassed, but if he didn’t finish what he’d started saying, she might take it the wrong way. He wouldn’t want that.

“...I think she’s cute. Really.”

“Oh...” Shihoru bowed politely to him for some reason. “Th-Tha... nk... you...”

“N-No, thank... you?”

“Nyoooh? What’re you two doin’?”

I don’t want to hear that from the person who got us into this mess. That’s what Ranta might have shot back with, but obviously Moguzo couldn’t say such a thing.

“Oh! So, about the food Yume likes.”

Oh, and now we’re suddenly back to that, was something he couldn’t say, either.

“Yume, she’ll eat anythin’ that tastes good, y’know?”

After all that, you’re fine with anything, was, yet again, something he couldn’t say.

“A-As for me...”

What a good person Shihoru is, trying to smooth things over.

“Personally... um, I’d like something that won’t be fattening if I eat a lot of it...”

Diet food?!

That’s what she wants?

That?

Well, she is a girl; maybe that’s just how it is.

Their opinions were even less useful than I imagined.

It must have been apparent to Shihoru that Moguzo was thinking this as he ground his molars, because she ducked her head.

“...I-I’m sorry. That’s not much help, huh? It’s because I’m fat...”

I don’t think that has anything to do with it. I mean, you’re not particularly fat to begin with.

He really wished he could say that. But he couldn’t possibly.

Moguzo stared up to the sky.

He wanted enlightenment.

The moment he wished for it, his stomach grumbled. Moguzo hurriedly looked to Yume and Shihoru. It seemed neither of them had heard. What a relief. Then it happened.

“Ah...!”

Just now, in the corner of his vision, he’d seen something!

“Moguzo? You see somethin’?”

“Y-Yeah...”

With a perfunctory response to Yume’s question, Moguzo started to search for it. There it was. This was the place. There were barrels standing in front of the stall, and he could see inside. Moguzo pointed, and spoke to the owner.

“W-Would that happen to be... rice?!”

The owner of the stall looked at him dubiously and gave a curt nod.

“It’s mainland-grown rice. What about it?”

5. Top Secret

Once, there was a man. Okay, yes, there are men everywhere, but don’t bring that up now. This is just a preface to the story. Or rather, a preface to the preface.

Anyway, there was a man. The man was once a volunteer soldier. Now, this is an all-too-common story, but together with his comrades the man fought, and fought, and fought; day after day he fought, and though sometimes he rested, he mostly fought, and earned money. He fought a ton. After all the fighting, the end came suddenly.

“Hey, Takakage! Takakage?! Takakage?! Pull yourself together...!”

“U-Usuradani... I-It’s no good, I can’t...”

“Don’t say that, Takakage! Don’t give up! If you give up, that’s game over! So don’t give up, you idiot!”

“D-Don’t call me an idiot... The people who call people idiots are the real idiots...”

“That’s what you’re gonna get mad over?! Hey?! In this situation, that’s really what you’re going to get mad over?! I mean, this clearly isn’t the time!”

“I... I’m not... mad...”

“You so are! I can tell! You’re totally mad!”

“...I’m not... mad...”

“Takakage?! Takakage?! Takakageeeeeeeeeeeeeee?!”

“Ru... zo...”

“What?! What did you say?! What?! If you’ve got something to say—”

“So... ru... zo...”

“Soruzo...?”

“Hey! Usuradani!” One of their other comrades grabbed Usuradani by the arm and pulled.

“We need to run! The way this is going, the rest of us will go down, too...!”

“How can we leave Takakage...?!”

“Fine, you stay! The rest of us are going!”

“The hell?! I’m going, too! Of course I am! So, there you have it, Takakage! I won’t say good-bye! Just, so long...!”

*This is a reconstruction based on interpretation of hearsay and rumors. It may vary slightly from the actual events. Please understand.

After the loss of Takakage, Usuradani began to feel he had reached the limits of life as a volunteer soldier, and he quit.

However, though he could resign from being a volunteer soldier, he could not resign from being human. Actually, the only way to stop being human, generally, was to die, and he had quit being a volunteer soldier because he didn’t want to die, so he had to live, and to do that, he needed to make a living—so, after much consideration, he chose to enter the food and drinks business.

“I do like to eat, after all. If I’ve gotta eat, I want it to be tasty. I mean, eating bad food makes me mad. This is pretty obvious, but you only get to eat a limited number of times in your life, right? Well, when you eat something disgusting, you’ve wasted one of those chances, and that pisses me off. I get the impression there are plenty of people, male and female, who want to eat good food, so maybe a restaurant could work? I’ve got some savings, so why not try? Let’s do this. Yeah! I’m gonna do it...!”

*This may be slightly different from the actual events. Please understand.

Usuradani had been in a six-person party. With the loss of Takakage, there were five. Once Usuradani left, four. *Four people? Four’s not enough for this*, was the thinking that led to two of those four joining Usuradani, and they started a food and drinks business as partners.

“Taking a little from each of our names—Usuradani, Tsumozuka, and Yanku—

how about we call it Usutsumoya?!”

“Hold up, Usuradani. Why’s your name first?”

“Yeah, yeah. We can go with Yantsu’u instead.”

“Hey, wait, Yanku. That only gives me one letter. That’s not right.”

“Shut up, Usuradani. Your original suggestion gave you guys two syllables to my one. I only got the Ya.”

“Stuff it, Yanku. I mean, what kind of name is Yanku anyway? I’ve been wondering all this time. The hell is Yanku supposed to be?”

“Wha—Usuradani, that’s what you thought...?”

“Sorry, Yanku. I’ve been thinking that, too.”

“Et tu, Tsumozuka?! Whatever! I can’t deal with you guys anymore! See ya!”

“Oh, yeah? See ya.”

“Stop me! You’re supposed to stop me! At least once!”

“Nah, forget it. You’re too much of a pain.”

“Damn it! You better not forget this, Usuradani! You neither, Tsumozuka! I swear I’ll make you regret this!”

This may have varied slightly from actual events, but, well, that’s more or less how Yanku left after quarreling with the rest of the group.

Usuradani and Tsumozuka put off naming the business for the time being, and spent all night talking about what kind of food and drinks business they wanted to run—over drinks.

“...Yeah, I want a woman.”

“Huh? What’re you talking about, Tsumozuka... The food, man. The food. This is a restaurant we’re gonna be running here...”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Usuradani? What’s the one appetite that’s equal to our desire for food...? Our desire for sex, obviously!”

“Yeah, and?! Are you screwing with me here?! I’ll beat the hell out of you!”

“Bring it, grey-hair...!”

“H-Hey, I’m sensitive about that! Tsumozuka, man, I can’t let that one slide!”

“If you’re not gonna let it slide, then what?!”

“I’m gonna kill you!”

“Did you just say you’d kill me?! Kill *me*?! Ohhh, you did, didn’t you?! You said the one thing you shouldn’t have, didn’t you?!”

“Oh, shut up!”

“You hit me?! Even my own father never hit me!”

“Yeah, maybe your father never did, but you’ve been hit so much you seem used to it!”

“Well, sorry! Who’re you to tell me what I can be into?!”

“You’re into getting hit?! We’ve known each other a pretty long time, and I never knew that. I never realized. Wow, that’s gross! You’re a creep!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, grey-hair!”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Greeeeey-haaaaiiir.”

“You sang it?! You went and sang it?! With vibrato?! With a unique groove?! And you sound weirdly good?! Oh, enough of this! I can’t deal with you anymore. Bye-bye!”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to work with you, either! See ya, grey-hair! I mean, Usuradani! See ya...!”

“Usuradani and grey-hair don’t sound similar! The number of syllables doesn’t even match...!”

Even if the details here vary slightly from the facts, Tsumozuka left more or less under those circumstances, and Usuradani ended up managing the restaurant business alone.

Usuradani thought and thought, and after a process of trial and error he settled on a stall that would offer noodles made with flour. Noodles made by kneading flour with a small amount of salt and water were already widespread in Alterna. Usuradani initially meant to compete in that market segment, too,

but the more he thought about it, the more he started to feel he didn't stand a chance. If he was doing the same thing as other people, the sales wouldn't be there.

Usuradani went around eating at restaurants that served noodles. He pressed on with indomitable spirit as he looked for something different that would sell.

As a result, he was able to find one hope.

If I'm making a noodle dish, my focus should really be on the noodles.

With a certain adjustment, he succeeded in creating a unique noodle that was like nothing anyone else had, and yet it made him think, *This, this, this is it...* It felt awfully familiar for some reason.

Then, considering cost and a number of other factors, Usuradani narrowed down the menu of his restaurant to just one dish. He would stake everything on that one dish. It was sink or swim. If he failed, he would cross that bridge when he came to it. He took a sip of the soup from his all-or-nothing dish, and slurped some of the yellow noodles. Then, with a single nod, Usuradani whispered to himself.

"You are soruzo. The last, mysterious word that Takakage, the man who gave me the impetus to go on this journey, left me with—Soruzo. I name you soruzo...!"

The details vary slightly from the facts, but the above is the secret legend surrounding the origin of soruzo.

Ranta stood before a man with salt and pepper hair—Usuradani, the owner of the soruzo stall—performing a brilliant kowtow.

"Please...! Bestow upon me the secret art of making soruzo! Why am I speaking like that?! I dunno, but, seriously, soruzo is the best, so, please, please, I'm begging you...!"

Usuradani crossed his arms, closing his eyes in contemplation.

Then, suddenly... his eyes snapped open, and he glared at Ranta.

"No."

"Gabyoon!"

Ranta flipped over, still in his kowtowing pose.

“Gabyoon! Gaaaabyoon! Gabyobyoon...! No way, seriously?! You looked like you were going to say yes! Or was I just misunderstanding?!”

“You were misunderstanding. Why would I teach a young pup like you, who I’ve got no ties or obligation to, the secrets of my business?”

“B-Because! I’m taking part in a cooking battle! In order to win, I’ve got to make just the right dish! I know soruzo’s the thing! Aren’t you honored?! You are, right?! Of all the dishes in Alterna, I chose soruzo! Okay?!”

“You think I care about your stupid contest? It has nothing to do with me.”

“It may have nothing to do with you, but I’m performing a kowtow and asking you, aren’t I?! Look! I’m begging you! Come on, come on, come on!”

Ranta flipped himself back over, and performed a number of high-speed kowtows.

“With all the times I’ve begged you, you could just teach me, you cheapskate!”

“Cheapskaaaate?! ”

“Whoa, whoa. I’m sowwie. My true feelings just slipped out! No, no, my tongue just slipped a bit!”

The way things were going, a knife was bound to come flying in his direction. Left with no choice, Ranta stood up and began brushing the dirt off his knees.

“Fiiiine. I get it. I won’t ask again.”

“Good choice. I wouldn’t teach you, even if you did.”

“In exchange...”

“How are you so arrogant about every little thing...?”

“I’ll learn by watching! All you have to do is show me how you work! That should be fine, right?! You aren’t gonna complain, are you?! ”

“...You really don’t listen to what anyone is saying, huh?” Usuradani let out a sigh, then he spat out, “Well, whatever. Do as you please. But if you get in my way, I’m running you out of here.”

“Got it! I won’t make you regret this!”

“I already kind of do...”

“Hahahaha! You’re just imagining it! That’s all!”

6. Bad Behavior

“...Um.” Moguzo lowered his head. “I-I’m kinda sorry about this, Haruhiro-kun. Making you do something so weird...”

“Ah...” Haruhiro scratched the back of his head. His eyes looked sleepy. “Well, it’s fine. I mean, this isn’t even your fault, right? I don’t think you’re the one who needs to apologize. What I’m getting at here is, this is all on Ranta, isn’t it?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoooooa!” Ranta put his left hand on his hip, and pointed with his right at Haruhiro. “Man, don’t you go dissing me like that, Parupiro! You try to make everything my fault!”

“I mean, whenever something happens, it almost always is.”

“That’s prejudice! If Moguzo didn’t accept, this battle wouldn’t be happening! Therefore, we need a witness! And for a contest we need judges, too! Ideally an odd number! Because with an even number, there could be a tie!”

At the competition site set up in the courtyard of the volunteer soldier lodging house stood a total of six people: the contestants, Moguzo and Ranta; the witness, Haruhiro; and the judges, Manato, Yume, and Shihoru.

Moguzo and Ranta stood facing one another with Haruhiro standing in between them.

Manato, Yume, and Shihoru sat a little distance away.

“On that note!” Ranta puffed out his chest and cleared his throat loudly. “The rules of this contest are easy! They are clear and simple! Me and Moguzo will each prepare one dish, and the three judges will taste them! Then, they decide which was tastier! Judges must side with one or the other! Then it will either be 3-0, or 2-1, creating an inevitable difference! This makes victory and defeat clear!”

“Question.”

Manato raised his hand, and Ranta pointed at him.

“What, Manato?! Keep it brief!”

“Are we just deciding a winner and loser here? Is there any benefit to winning?”

“Of course! Obviously, there’s got to be, right?! The winner can make the loser do anything! That’s pretty normal!”

“Well, in that case...”

“Hey, Yume, don’t speak without raising your hand!”

“Oh, shush. It’s fine, isn’t it?”

“It is not fine!”

“Fine, Yume won’t say nothin’ then.”

“Say it! You’ll leave me wondering what you meant to say! What if I can’t sleep because of that?! If you start saying something, you have a responsibility to finish it!”

“Not Yume’s problem! If you can’t sleep, you don’t have to.”

“If I don’t sleep, I’ll suffer from sleep deprivation! My health relies on sleeping well, shitting well, and boasting well!

“Boasting well...”

When Shihoru repeated the last one with a look of exasperation, Ranta glared at her with a vein throbbing on his forehead.

“Huhhhh?! You got a problem with that?! If you do, pleeease, say so! Come right out and saaaay it! It pisses me off when you act like that!”

“You know, Ranta...” Manato said with a smile, “I’ve been thinking this for a while, but you’re a natural, you know that? You have an incredible gift.”

“...Oh? Y-You think? W-well, sure, I guess? It’s true I’m not just talented, I’m a real genius.”

“You have a gift for rubbing people the wrong way.”

“Heyyyy! Manatoooo! I don’t need a gift for that!”

“You can’t really help it...” Haruhiro sighed. “You just happen to have been born with a gift for pissing people off. I guess genius comes at a price, huh?”

“Hm... Genius comes at a price? I like the ring of that. It sounds cool...”

Ranta put a hand to his jaw, looking not just a little satisfied. *He’s so blissfully simple*, Moguzo thought, but he didn’t say it. He didn’t want to be like Ranta, but he did envy him a little.

“Okay, I more or less get the rules, but...” Haruhiro probably wasn’t actually tired, but his eyes really did make him look sleepy. “So, um, a witness? That’s why I’m here, right? I’m the only one who’s not a judge. Does that mean I don’t get to eat any of the food?”

“Exactly!”

“What the hell? Moguzo’s is sure to be delicious. I want some, too. I don’t care about yours, though.”

“Whaddaya mean you don’t care about mine?! Expect it to be great! Do it!”

“Even if I did, you wouldn’t let me eat any, right?”

“It’s punishment! Punishment! Divine punishment for the guy who said he doesn’t care about my ultra-special dish!”

“Ha-Haruhiro-kun. I’ll make enough for you to have some, too...”

“Hey, Moguzo! Don’t try to buy off the witness with a crass bribe!”

“I’m not one of the deciders here, so there’s no point buying me off anyway.”

“That’s not the point! I can’t stand how nice he is!”

“Just how warped is your personality, man...?”

“Shut up! Be quiet! I’ve had enough of you and your sleepy eyes! Go to sleep, Haruhiro! Permanently! Bye-bye! Okay, Moguzo! Let’s get this show on the road!”

“Oh, uh, sure...”

“...Just do whatever you want, geez.” Haruhiro seemed to be sulking. For

some reason, everything was going crazy.

“Okay.” Having read the situation, Manato stood up. “I’ll give the signal to start. —*Allez cuisine...*!”

That clear, dignified voice gave Moguzo the push he needed.

“Show him who’s boss, Moguzo!”

“...Moguzo-kun, you can do it!”

With Yume and Shihoru, who had helped him pick out ingredients, cheering him on, Moguzo rose to the challenge.

“O-Okay...!” Moguzo slapped his cheeks. He did it too hard and it hurt, but that helped him focus.

“Heh...” Ranta pointed at him. “You better prepare yourself, Moguzo. I’m gonna utterly demolish you! Expect no mercy!”

“S-Since we’re doing this, let’s have a good match...!”

“You dolt! There’s no good or bad in a match! The winner is always right, and the loser is nothing but pitiful! That’s why I’m definitely going to win!”

Had he put a lot of work into his recipe, and that was where this confidence came from? Or was he full of baseless bravado? Ranta huffed and puffed as he headed to his cooking station.

Whatever the case, Moguzo was just going to do his best. Unlike Ranta, he didn’t go to the cooking area. Moguzo would prepare his dish here. In addition to the cooking area, the courtyard also had a stove that was blessed with a rustic simplicity. Moguzo’s dish of choice only needed boiling, so he was fine out here in the yard. He had his ingredients ready, too.

Next to the stove was—

“Err, first I use this, and... Huh?!”

“What’s wrong, Moguzo?” Haruhiro asked as he came over.

Next to the stove there were ingredients lined up in baskets. Moguzo had prepared them all in advance.

One of the baskets was empty for some reason.

“It’s gone! Gone! I know I left a hunk of ganaro meat in this basket! It was here when I checked before, so why...?!”

“No way, was it him...?!” Haruhiro looked towards the cooking area. “I don’t want to think he’d go that far, but... This is Ranta we’re talking about, after all. I’m going over to his space to ask him about it. I am technically acting as the witness here. If he’s cheated, there’ll be a price to pay for it...”

“No.” Moguzo shook his head. “It’s fine... It must have been a mistake on my part.”

“But it’s a hunk of meat, right? If this were a spice or something, I’d understand. It’s not a little thing. How could you misplace it?”

“It’s fine! I’ll manage... I’ll do this somehow. I want to make something tasty for everyone to eat.”

Moguzo picked up a basket full of rice. What he had bought at the marketplace was uncooked rice that had just been threshed, but polishing rice took a long time, so he had done it last night.

“I want Ranta to eat it, too. I don’t care if this is a contest or whatever. That’s what cooking is about for me.”

“Moguzo...” Haruhiro frowned. “...But, man, just how scummy can that guy be?”

7. Here is a Battle I Cannot Afford to Lose

“Don’t hold this against me, Moguzo,” Ranta said with a nihilistic smile as he looked at the hunk of ganaro meat sitting atop the cooking station, “Even as great as I am, I know I’m at a disadvantage against a skilled cook like you. I’m a realist, you know. I at least understand that facing Moguzo in a fair fight, my chances of winning are minimal. I’ve gotta rely on cunning. Even if Moguzo figures out I made a move against him, knowing his personality, he won’t say anything. That’s the kind of guy he is. Too nice for his own good. That’s a strong point and a weak point. His excessive kindness will dig his own grave. He’s got to learn. That reality’s harsh, and there are times when you’ve gotta be cruel...!”

Ranta guffawed heartily, then cocked his head to the side.

“But rice and ganaro meat? What was he trying to make...? Well, whatever it was, Moguzo can’t use meat anymore. I mean, this meat looks pretty expensive. He can’t go and buy more now. So, I’ll be the one to use it for him! Yes, me! How heinous! Truly, I am a model dread knight!”

With carving knife in hand, he took the meat—*I’ll cut it!*

At the last moment, Ranta stopped.

“...Is this okay? It is, right? Am I going a bit too far? Like, no matter how this goes, they’re not going to look kindly on it...? No, no. It’s not like me to be afraid of that. Y-Yeah. This is to win! Not sweating the morality when it’s for the victory is my justice! Yeah! If I lose, I’ll be mocked! I’ve got to win! I’ve already dirtied my hands here! With this misappropriated meat! As if I could give it back now! Yeah, how would I face them...? I have to use the meat now! To dispose of the evidence! It’d be a shame to just throw it away! We’ve gotta eat it! Hah, hah, hah, hah! Once it’s cooked, no one’ll know where the meat came from! Okay, I’m doing this! Do it, Dread Knight Ranta! Cut it! Cut it up...! H-Huh...? But do you cut the char siu first...? Do you do it before, or after? Which was it...? Aw, crap. I know I had this down from watching Usuradani, but I’ve forgotten now...?! How could I forget...?! How...?! It’s absurd! R-R-R-Remember...! Char siu, char siu... How do you make char siu...? I mean, isn’t char siu supposed to be made with pork? Ganaroos are more, I dunno, cow-like...? Is this okay? I dunno. Am I screwed...? No. No, no, no, no, no, no...”

Ranta looked to the ceiling, and took a deep breath.

“...Yeah. Nope! Not doing the char siu for now! It’s canceled! I’ll do it when I know for sure! For now, the noodles! Noodles! That’s where it’s at! Let’s see. Flour, flour... Good, good. Found it. This is it. I just dump the flour out on the cutting board, and... Whoa?! ”

He poured too much. There was a limit to how much he needed to dump, and yet the flour from the flax bag was spread all over, from the cutting board to the floor.

“Damn it! Have you no control, Flour?! Damn you, Flour...! You’re supposed to stop! I can’t pick you up off the floor, so you’re the one in trouble here! Think

about it a little, Flour...! Oh, enough! I'll give up on the portion that fell! I'm only dealing with the flour on the board! Umm, first comes water! Splash! Now, soruzo noodles are yellowish! It's time to solve the secret behind that mystery! Usuradani never told me, but I figured it out! This is it...! Eggs!"

When Ranta cracked an egg and added it to the flour, the shell got in there, too.

"Ngh! Damn it...! The shell, the shell! I gotta get it out of there! Is that all of it? No, there's still more, arrrgh! Enough of this! What's a little shell matter, really?! It's probably good for your health somehow! Gives you something to sink your teeth into! Now, I take this... and mix them!"

He mixed.

He mixed and mixed.

He just kept mixing.

"...Tch! It won't stick to my hands! I can't quite get it to knead! What's up with that?! Usuradani did it more like this...!"

He mixed and he mixed. He mixed like Usuradani. Mixed and mixed like mad.

"Good! Good! Good...! Now it's starting to look like dough! Huh?! Come to think of it, I was supposed to put, like, salt and whatnot in here, right?! Well, it's fine if I do it now, I guess! Sprinkle, sprinkle! Do I need more? If I'm putting it in, I should go all out! Wh-What?! I'm all outta salt?! Now, at a time like this, I'm facing a salt shortage?! What'll I do for the soup?! No, no! If the noodles are salty, that'll do it! Heheheh! Of course! First comes the dough! I'll make the best noodles ever! The ultimate noodles! Hurrah...!"

The noodle dough had taken on a more round shape now, so he started to knead it.

"Gwohrah...!"

He beat it against the cutting board, and kneaded it.

"Zwosharahhh...!"

He kneaded. He kneaded like crazy. He knead, knead, knead, knead, knead, knead, knead, knead, kneaded away.

“Faiyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...!”

Not satisfied to just knead, he beat it, too. He lifted it up and then punched it into the cutting board several times. He beat it. With his fists. He beat the crap out of it. *Bam, bam, thump, thump, pow, pow*, he whaled on it until—*What’s this?*

“It’s gettin’ hard?! It’s gettin’ rock hard?! What’s it gettin’ so hard for?! No, wait, what am I talkin’ like Yume for?! Well, forget about that... Can I even cut this?! Can I cut this into thin strips when it’s so hard?! It’s kinda impossible, right?! This looks bad; I guess I’ll save it for later. That good? Yeah. On to the soup. I’ll do the soup next! Erm, put water in the pot. Water. Good. I like it. Now for the soup base. I know what to use. Here they are. Bones! I dunno what from, but they were cheap. Free, in fact! Thanks to that, I have a ton! I just toss these into the pot, and boil! Light it up, light it up! Light up the oven! Yeah... This is such a pain to do. I’ll do it, though. I’ve gotta.”

Using flint to light a fire in the oven, Ranta was able to finish the task quickly.

“...That was too easy, if I do say so myself. What I did just now. Am I beyond awesome, or what? It’s a crying shame that I don’t have an audience here. Well, when they get a taste of my soruzo, they’ll be forced to acknowledge my greatness. Heheheh... Hahh, hah, hah, ha, hahhhh! Gweh, cough, cough, bwuh?! S-S-Smoke?! Oh, crap! The smoke’s going nuts here?! Wh-Wh-What am I gonna do...?!”

8. Believe in Yourself

The issue was the amount of fire.

That was the one thing he needed to focus on.

“Now!”

Moguzo pulled on the stick passed through the pot’s handle. From low, to medium, to high heat, then let it simmer. He cooked skillfully, changing the temperature like this. He didn’t know if it was past knowledge from before he came to Grimgar, or what, but he knew that controlling heat with a cooking stove was difficult. If he tried to do anything to the flame itself, it would eat up

all his attention, which might lead him to neglect the condition of the pot and mess up as a result. That's why Moguzo kept the fire at a consistent level, and opted to change the distance between the pot and the flames instead. It was a simple thing, and yet quite hard to think of.

"I'm still under-experienced...!"

He was dripping with sweat. There were handles on either side of the pot, and he had a sturdy pole passed through each of them. If he didn't keep things level, the stove would shift, and the pot would spill, so it took a lot of strength.

"Kuh, kuh, kuh, kuh...! Guh, guh, guh, guh...!" Moguzo grunted and groaned.

"Moguzo! Keep on givin' it your all...!"

"D-Don't give up, Moguzo-kun...!"

Yume and Shihoru were still cheering him on.

"Um, Moguzo..." Haruhiro came over. "Should I help? If there were two of us each holding one end of those poles, rather than you just holding a single side, I think it'd be an easy win..."

"I-I'm fine, Haruhiro-kun...! This is my... my and Ranta-kun's one-on-one fight!"

"Well, yeah, sure. But you look like you're having a hard time. It's pretty hard to just watch. Ranta's in the cooking area, so if you keep quiet, he'll never know..."

"You can't, Haruhiro." Manato, who had been sitting beside Yume and Shihoru, stood up, and he spoke in an uncharacteristically strict tone of voice. "If you do, Moguzo won't really have won. No matter how Ranta breaks the rules, no matter how ridiculous the stunts he pulls are, Moguzo will fight fair and square. And he'll win. That's important!"

"...Huh? I-Is that how it works?"

"Yeah. Moguzo understands that. That's why he's trying to fight alone, no matter how hard it is."

"He's right, Haruhiro-kun...!"

No matter how much sweat got into his eyes, Moguzo squinted but did not close them. He held his quivering arms stable, not letting the height of the pot change, no matter what.

“I...! I...! I know it’s weird for me to say this, but I’m timid, and indecisive, and I lack confidence in myself! I have hardly anything I can take pride in! But this is the one thing...! When it comes to cooking, I can’t lose...!”

“...Moguzo. You’re that devoted to cooking. Hold on, why are you so focused on cooking...?”

“This is...!” Moguzo turned his sweaty face to Haruhiro, and grinned. “...My pride!”

“...Well, okay, Moguzo. But you’re a warrior, not a cook, aren’t you?”

“Haru-kun...!” Yume shook her head. “If you start sayin’ that, it’s all over!”

“...It is?” Shihoru seemed a little doubtful.

“It is!”

When Manato immediately declared it to be so, Shihoru gave a firm nod.

“...Y-Yeah! It’ll be over, right...!”

“It’ll be over...” Haruhiro seemed persuaded.

Moguzo felt like if he lost focus, the pot would lower.

“Hungh...!”

Moguzo kept shouting to keep himself on task.

“Nwah...! Hahh...! Houaghghh...! Kuuoahhhhhhhh...!”

It was all in the simmer.

He had to keep it simmering.

“Fwah?! Moguzo, you’re gettin’ all smokey...!” Yume shouted.

This was—steam.

There was an unusual amount of steam rising from Moguzo’s entire body.

“Moguzo-kun, a-aren’t you reaching your limit?!”

“Not yet, Shihoru!”

“...Manato-kun?!”

“Moguzo’s nowhere near his limit! Even if he is, I know Moguzo can break through it! Believe in Moguzo’s hidden potential...!”

“Potential...” Haruhiro seemed overwhelmed. “I don’t think he needs to use his potential on this...”

Moguzo was almost there. If he could just endure this.

“Thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaanks...!”

Moguzo bellowed, and Manato flexed his arm.

“There it is! His super move, the Thanks Slash...!”

“...Uh, he’s not slashing anything, though?!”

“Haru-kun! You’re hurtin’ Yume and everyone’s feelin’s!”

“A-Am I...?”

“Haruhiro!”

Manato gave him a complex hand signal, and Haruhiro nodded slightly.

“...G-Got it. Uh, no, I don’t really get it, but whatever...”

“...Yeah!” Shihoru had tears in her eyes at this point.

The meaning in all this came across fully. To his comrades.

“Right now, my soul...!”

Finally, Moguzo moved the pole, and set the pot down on the ground.

“...Is boiling! I can’t take the lid off yet...!”

“It’s smellin’ great.” Yume sniffed the air, a sparkle in her eye. Shihoru seemed entranced.

“...It really is.”

“But the issue is...” Manato, who had been so excited a moment ago, had already regained his composure. “The meat that was going to be the main dish is gone. What will you do, Moguzo?”

“It’s okay.” Moguzo wiped the sweat from all over his body, and took a deep breath. “I have it sorted out in my head. There’s a way to win. I’m going to believe in the hidden potential that you believed in, too, Manato. I won’t lose...! Because that is my justice...!”

9. And the Moment of Truth Comes

Bang...

There was the beat of a drum coming from somewhere.

Bang...

Bang...

The sound of the drum echoed.

Well, no, not really. In truth, he was just imagining it, but, well, think of it as building the atmosphere.

As the darkness of night closed in on the courtyard of the volunteer soldier lodging house, Ranta crossed his arms and puffed out his chest as he stood opposite Moguzo.

The wind blew past.

“Heh...” Ranta snorted. “Looks like a storm’s brewing.”

“No, it’s still clear out.”

“Shut up, Parupiro! It’s a matter of feeling! Don’t be such a wet blanket!”

“Yeah.” Moguzo took a big step forward with his large body. “I feel like... there’s a storm coming any minute, too, Ranta-kun.”

“That’s some big talk.”

Ranta licked his lips. He looked at Moguzo. Honestly, he hadn’t expected this.

“Man, I didn’t know you could make that face. You’ve got the look of a fighter. I like it. Gets me fired up, too. I accept you as a worthy opponent! In our cooking battle, he who strikes first wins! Naturally, I’ll be going first—did you think I’d say that? Tch, tch, tch! In these things, everyone knows the advantage

is with the person who goes last! Therefore, Moguzo! You go first! I'm sure you have no issue with that, right...?"

"Unuahhhh..."

"The hell, Yume? You're not even in this, so why do you sound so unhappy?!"

"Because, y'know, it's obvious Moguzo's is gonna be more tasty. Yume doesn't wanna hafta eat yours after havin' his."

"...She has a point." Shihoru was beside Yume, with an even more unpleasant look on her face. "It feels like we'll only remember the bad one. That's terrible..."

"Why you...! Don't assume my cooking's gonna be terrible! I'll grope you, damn it!"

"Moguzo?" With his eyes as sleepy as ever, Haruhiro turned to Moguzo and prompted him as the witness. "If you want to go second, too, we can decide it by rock, paper, scissors, or something."

"No. I don't mind going first." Moguzo said firmly.

He's full of confidence, huh? That's not like him—Is not what I should be thinking now. I should assume this is Moguzo's true form.

Haruhiro and Manato nodded to one another, and then Haruhiro took a deep breath.

"Okay, Moguzo goes first, Ranta second. Please, start right away, Moguzo."

"Okay...!"

Moguzo pulled out a piece of white cloth he had gotten from somewhere and put it on like a bandana, then he lifted a pot up onto the table.

At the table, Yume, Shihoru, and finally Manato—the three judges—were already seated. Haruhiro stood alone, a slight distance away, looking incredibly left out.

"That's your cooking, Moguzo?"

When Ranta gestured towards the pot with his chin, Moguzo put his hand on the lid.

“No. Not yet, Ranta-kun. My cooking is just getting started...!”

“Huh? You’re not finished? Pfft! What a laugh. If you’re not ready, then I win by def—”

“Shut up and watch! Thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaanks...!”

When Moguzo opened the lid, *whoosh*, together with the steam came the smell of fresh-cooked rice. That gust of sweet-smelling wind made Ranta stumble.

“Kuh...?! You hit me not with a Thanks Slash, but a Thanks Opening...?!”

“And this, too...!”

Moguzo made a wooden bowl appear from somewhere, and threw the contents of it into the pot. Then, using a ladle, he mixed it up. He mixed and mixed.

“Thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaanks...!”

“Damn it, Moguzo! After that Thanks Opening, you’re also unveiling your super skill, Thanks Mixing?!”

“I’ve never heard of a skill called that...”

Haruhiro was being a buzzkill, but no one would agree with him, and he probably felt out of place. Well, this was Haruhiro, after all, so it was to be expected. Like, Haruhiro didn’t even matter, anyway.

“What are you planning to make, Moguzo?! Stop your futile resistance...!”



“Hung...!”

Moguzo laid down the ladle, then thrust both hands into a bucket. Ranta’s eyes widened. Inside the bucket was...

“Water...?! Moguzo, you...?!”

“Thaaaaaaaanks! Thaaaaaaaanks! Thaaaaaaaanks...!”

With his wet hands, Moguzo took the white rice and—no, he took the white rice and something that was on it, and he pressed them. He pressed and pressed. Manato nodded.

“He isn’t pressing hard, but soft. That’s our Moguzo. His control is exquisite. That is the legendary Thanks Press...!”

“It’s legendary now...?”

Undeterred from making his half-hearted comedic retorts, Haruhiro had about as much presence as the air around them.

Ranta gritted his teeth. His brow was furrowed so deeply his skull might crack.

“What is this pressure? Damn Moguzo, I never realized you were this good...”

“Thaaaaaaaanks! Thaaaaaaaanks! Thaaaaaaaanks! Thaaaaaaaanks!
Thaaaaaaaanks...!”

“Wow! It’s close to bein’ done...?!”

“This is...!”

Yume and Shihoru half-rose from their seats. Manato looked at the food laid out on the plate in front of him, and his mouth hung open a little.

“Go on...!” With a bold smile, Moguzo clapped his hands. “This is my dish! Specially-made onigiri! Dig in...!”

“...Nigirimeshi.” Ranta gritted his teeth. “So, you originally planned to make meat-wrapped onigiri...?! What a terrifying dish...!”

“Ahhh...” Haruhiro hung his head, and rubbed his stomach.

“Meat-wrapped onigiri sounds pretty tasty. Wish I could’ve eaten some. And hold on, Ranta, you just practically confessed to stealing the meat, you

know...?”

“Oh, shove off! Don’t dredge up the past!”

“No, you’re still in the middle of the contest. It’s not the past at all.”

“That sort of nitpicking is exactly what’s wrong with you! You’re no good! Reflect on that, moron!”

“Hey, can we just declare him the loser for cheating? I’m sick of seeing his face.”

“Before that, Haru-kun, Yume, y’know, she wants to hurry up and start eatin’ some onigiri.”

“...M-Me, too.”

“You said it. I agree.”

When all three judges raised their hands, Haruhiro sighed and extended the plate with his right hand.

“Okay, go ahead.”

“It’s eatin’ time!”

“...Th-Thank you for the food.”

“Thank you!”

The three grabbed their onigiri in unison, and dug in.

“Mrrrowr...?! ”

“...Ah?! ”

“Oh, wow...!”

What to make of this? For a moment, their faces all flushed red. Their eyes were moist. Yume was outright crying as she gobbled away.

“Mewwwww. This is delish... Delicious. It’s too good. Yume doesn’t know what to do about it.”

“I-I can’t stop... I could eat so many of these... I want to keep eating forever...!”

“These are crazy! Moguzo, you’ve outdone yourself!”

Manato alone seemed to have maintained some level of composure, but even he was clearly excited.

Ranta gulped.

“Go ahead.”

With those words, Moguzo put a plate full of his special onigiri right in front of Ranta’s nose.

The two men’s eyes met.

“You, too, Ranta-kun. Have some if you’d like.”

“...B-Bring it on.”

Ranta snatched an onigiri. He didn’t peck away at it like some little bird. He did it all in one go. He opened his mouth wide and threw the whole thing in.

There was an explosion.

These colors were—*The rainbow...?!*

I’m tasting the rainbow?!

No, now is not the time to be intimidated. Analyze. Analyze it.

This flavor—it’s green shiso leaf? It tastes like shiso? There’s salt, too, of course. This richness and depth of flavor, could it be... cheese? Is it cheese? Because the rice was freshly cooked, it’s hot and melting! It’s melting in my mouth! And this fragrance, is it sesame? I’m detecting a sour taste, too. It’s got just the right amount of sourness. Also, it’s firm and crisp. Could these be wild herbs...? Yeah. One of the herbs we pick on our way back from hunting has this sort of mouthfeel when cooked. The faintly bittersweet taste provides a good accent. It all comes together melodiously with a multilayered depth...!

“The taste of the rainbow...! Moguzo...! You were able to turn a problem into an opportunity, and rise to such heights?! Damn iiiiiiiiiiiit...!”

Ranta took the last onigiri, sitting on a plate on the table, and he ate that one, too. Yeah, you bet he ate it.

“Whoa... Hey! Ranta, that one’s mine!”

“You shut up, Haruhiro! This is between me and Moguzo...!”

“That’s not the issue, and you know it... You ate my onigiri...”

“If you’re so hungry, I’ll let you eat my cooking! All right, it’s my turn now! Don’t get scared now...!”

Ranta brought over a pot that had been left on the oven, and slammed it down on the table with a resounding thud.

He opened the lid. Obviously, he went for the sudden reveal.

“Thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaanks...!”

“Now you’re swiping Moguzo’s Thanks Open, too... and hold on...”

“Wah...”

“...Uh...”

“Yeah...”

Haruhiro, Yume, Shihoru, and Manato were all clearly scared.

They’re scared. They’re scared. They’re super scared.

“Fwahahahah...!” With a great laugh, Ranta turned to Moguzo. “How do you like this, Moguzo?! I’ll admit your onigiri were tasty! I don’t mind praising you for attaining that rainbow flavor! However...! If you thought you could defeat me with that, you have another thing coming...! In the end, the guy who goes last wins! It’s the big turnaround! Yes, an overwhelming victory! That’s how it’s always been...!”

“U-Uh, okay, but, um...”

Moguzo looked at the pot with a frown. It was hard to read him. Had he lost confidence in the face of Ranta’s cooking?

“What *is* it...?”

“Huh? What do you mean, ‘what’? It’s soruzo, isn’t it?”

“Huh? ...Soruzo? Really? This is...?”

“No matter how you look at it, it’s soruzo! Look! Noodles!”

“...Those things that look like caterpillars?”

“The dough was too hard for me to cut it well. I tore it with brute force, and it ended up like this. Well, whatever. I’m breaking new ground in the noodle world. And, hey, calling them caterpillars is rude!”

“S-Sorry. U-Um, so, this new ground? These noodles? Are they... boiled...? Since you already put them in there...”

“Boiled...?” Ranta scratched his nose with the index finger of his right hand. “I forgot. Oh, yeah. I should’ve boiled them. Right, right. Well, it’s all the same once I put them in the soup. The pot was over the fire. They’ve gotta be boiled. Somewhat.”

“...I-Is meat the only other solid ingredient?”

“Yeah! It’s too much effort to keep the secret now, so I’ll say it, but it’s the meat I swiped from you! It looked like good meat! I figure I was right to only use this! I cut it, fried it, and threw it in!”

“And the soup? What did you use for stock...?”

“Stock, huh? Stock. I got it from bones. Not sure what kind of bones, though.”

“A-And to flavor it...?”

“You know, when I was making the noodles, I ran out of salt in the cooking area. But the noodles should be salty, so I figure it turned out fine.”

“...Should? Huh? Have you taste-tested it...?”

“Now, listen, Moguzo,” Ranta said, jabbing his index finger at the tip of Moguzo’s nose, “Let’s say, for example, you’re buying a sword, okay? If you think it looks good, do you go slice up a goblin first before you buy it? You don’t, right? You trust the feeling you have for it, and go straight into a real battle, right? This is basically the same thing, right? I believe this is gonna work. Taste-testing is for chickens. I don’t need it.”

“B-But that’s totally different... With a sword, even if you don’t test it on goblins, it’s not like you can’t test its edge on other things...”

“I don’t need to! Because I’m me! The incredible me!”

“Yume doesn’t know about the taste, but...” Yume arched her eyebrows and frowned. “From the way it’s lookin’...”

“...It’s filthy,” Shihoru whispered. That made him snap.

“Hey! Shihoru! What’d you just say?! Did you just call it filthy?! Filthy!”

“Well, it might not taste that bad.”

When Manato said that with a smile, Ranta nodded as if he was in total agreement.

“Yeah, isn’t that right? Don’t go judging it by appearances. That causes all sorts of prejudice. It might not taste that... Hold on, are you subtly dissing my dish?!”

“That wasn’t my intention, but...” With chopsticks in hand, Manato hung his head. “...Do we really have to eat this stuff?”

“Ma-Manato-kun! Don’t force yourself! I-I’ll do it...! I don’t want to eat it, but... I am a judge, after all, and... I really don’t want to eat it, though...”

“Yume, neither. Yume reeeeeaaaally doesn’t wanna eat it. Unnngh. Oh, how Yume longs for Moguzo’s onigiri...”

“Damn it, guys! You’re the judges! Why are you all trying to push this off on someone else? Enough of this! Haruhiro! You eat it! I’ll grant you the honor of eating my special soruzo! It’ll taste even better on your empty stomach! Go on, eat...!”

Ranta scooped the soruzo into a bowl and brought it to Haruhiro. He gave him chopsticks, too.

“...Yeaaaah.”

With eyes that didn’t just look sleepy, but more like he was about to fall asleep, Haruhiro took a whiff of the steam.

“...Uhh. This is... I dunno... what is it...? It’s got a wild smell to it... Gamey, if I’m being honest...”

“It’s wild, right?! Then tear right into it!”

“...Seriously?”

“Seriously! Eat! It’s totally delicious! You’ll be seriously, seriously enraptured! Have no doubt, I guarantee it!”

“I don’t know if your guarantee is worth anything...”

“Whatever, just hurry it up! Hurry up! Hurry up! Hurrerrrry uuuuup! Life is short! Eat up, Parupiro! Eat, then thank me with tears of raw emotion in your eyes...!”

“Oh, fine... I’m really not into this, but I’ve just got to eat it, right? I’ll start with the soup...”

Hesitantly, Haruhiro brought the bowl to his lips.

He closed his eyes, and sipped.

“Uaghhhh...” He opened his mouth, and the broth spilled out.

“Gwuh?!” Ranta jumped back. “Gross! Man, what’re you doing, Haruhiro?! Come on, you stupid moron...!”

“No, wud is yor probulum...”

“I have no idea what you’re saying! Speak like a human, you dolt!”

“Ids gruth... gruth...”

“Huh?! Gross?! Like hell it is! It can’t be so bad it’s got you halfway to tears! Use some common sense!”

“Den you dry eading id...”

Haruhiro wiped the area around his mouth with his left hand, and then thrust the bowl and chopsticks toward Ranta.

Ranta took them, then looked to Manato, Yume, Shihoru, and Moguzo, one after another.

“...What is this pressure? Like you’re saying, ‘Don’t tell us *you* can’t eat it.’ Urgh. You’ve got guts, all working together to silently threaten me! But get this! I don’t give in to that sort of thing! Don’t think you can make me submit to peer pressure! If you’re telling me to eat it, well...! I’m not gonna...!”

“It’s fine, just eat it.”

Manato had an awfully pleasant—much too pleasant for this situation—smile on his face when he spoke.

“Eat it, Ranta.”

“I... I just have to eat it, right? That’s all! Fine, I’ll eat it, damn it all! B-Because it’s delicious, okay! It’s gotta be! I’m not scared one bit! I-I’ll eat it! I’ll so eat it! I’ll eat it all! Ahhhhhh...!”

Ranta plunged the chopsticks into the bowl. He wasn’t going to be cheap and start with the soup, or anything like that. He’d do this all in one go. Dig right in. He was gonna do it. He broke free from all the hesitation and indecision. —Go.

“Zubabababababababababababaaahhojjaahguhoghghwehahogubuhrahah...?!”

Ranta puked.

He spewed all that stuff he had put into his mouth back out without hesitation.

He jumped up, and tore at his hair.

“Who made this disgusting slop?! It’s more than just super stinky! This isn’t even food! Are you trying to kill me, making me eat this stuff?! Is this a blatant attempt to kill me...?! Then bring it on! I’ll kill you instead! I’ll turn the tables on you...!”

“Okay, go kill yourself then...”

“Shut up, Haruhiro! !! !! I...!”

“...Ohhh. He’s cryin’ now. That’s just gross.”

“Yumeeee! Don’t call me gross with your tiny tits!”

“Don’t call them tiny!”

“You’ve got tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny, mega tiny titties.”

“...If they’re mega tiny titties, wouldn’t that make them not tiny anymore?”

“I don’t need any calm and composed retorts from you and your secret mega boobs! Do you want me to force feed you this super disgusting soruzo?!”

“S-Stop! Seriously...! Anything but that...!”

“At this point, I don’t think there’s any need for judging.”

When Manato said that—smiling, of course—and gave a slight shrug,

Haruhiro lifted Moguzo's right arm.

"The winner is Moguzo. Though, knowing who the opponent was, I doubt he's that happy about it... Oh, yeah. The winner gets to make the loser do anything, right? Moguzo, what's it going to be?"

"Y-Yeah. About that..." Moguzo looked apologetically at the bowl of soruzo. "I wouldn't want the ingredients to go to waste, so I was thinking I'd have Ranta-kun eat all of it..."

"Fogib meee!"

With tears in his eyes and snot running from his nose, Ranta performed a rapid jumping kowtow.

"Spare me that, if nothing else...! Please, anything but that...! It's seriously disgusting! It's not even funny! I'd die, seriously! I'll do anything else, so, please, spare me that! I'm begging you, Moguzo! I love you, man! So, seriously, please...!"

And so, the sun set on another day at the volunteer soldier lodging house.

ex.5

Who I Was Until Yesterday

Grimgar of
Fantasy and Ash

Level. Fourteen Plus Plus

TRIP

1. What I Want to Ask

What was I doing again?

Oh, right. I was crying.

I'd learned that no matter how many tears I shed, I would never run out.

I never wanted to know, but I was forced to learn.

Tears don't run dry.

But the more I cried, the more I felt something slipping out from my body. Did I really have anything left to lose? It didn't feel like it. But apparently I was wrong about that. With every day, I lost more.

Every hour, every minute, every second, I lost something.

"Merry... Merry."

A voice called my name. Who would be calling me? I knew. I sat up in bed and looked vaguely towards Hayashi who was standing by the door. I tried to respond, but the words didn't come. Hayashi, who had stayed quiet for a while, opened his mouth.

"Hey, Merry. You know you can't just stay like this."

I'd have felt bad not giving Hayashi a response. That was the only reason I nodded.

Hayashi let out a little sigh of relief. "The thing is..." he started to say, "There's this clan called Orion. They're led by a guy named Shinohara. He's heard about our situation, and he's extending an invitation. He asked me if we want to join them."

"...Me, too?"

"Well, duh. Of course you're coming, too."

How was I supposed to respond at a time like this? What would the old me have done?

Michiki. Ogu. Mutsumi. Back when those three were still alive. The me who

had not yet failed in her duties as a priest by letting them die. I practically killed them. My precious comrades. No matter what happened, as the priest, I was going to protect my comrades. That was my intention. But intentions aren't enough. I had to protect them to the end. I thought I could. That may have been conceited of me. No, not may have been. It was.

The fact was, I couldn't.

I was wrong. The results spoke to that. I could only acknowledge them. I had to acknowledge it. I let my comrades die. I was a priest who couldn't protect her comrades' lives. That's no priest. That's garbage. Not even worthy of existing. Despite that, I had the gall to keep drawing breath. I survived.

I wished I had died. I should have at least died with them.

Hey, Hayashi. I don't want to do anything. I don't think I can anyway. But when I look at your face, there's one thing, just one thing that I desperately want to ask you.

Why?

Why did you drag me with you when you escaped that time?

If he wanted to run, he could have done it alone. I didn't want to run. I never had any intention of leaving my comrades. That wasn't how I did things. I wouldn't have done that. Ogu went down first. Then Mutsumi. When that happened, I thought, *It's hopeless. We can't possibly win. I doubt any of us will survive. We're going to die here.*

I'll die with everyone.

I never thought one bit about running.

"Go, run!"

Michiki said that to us. That much was a fact. Maybe Michiki did want us to survive if only we could. But what about my feelings? Did I say a word about wanting to survive? Did he think I would have wanted this?

Hey, Hayashi. Why did you do it?

Why wouldn't you let me die with Michiki and the rest?

“Orion...” I hung my head, simply answering, “Okay.”

It wasn't Hayashi's fault. Hayashi wasn't wrong. If I were Hayashi, I'm sure I would have done the same. That's why I wouldn't ask him that. I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want to touch the wound. —The wound? No. This was nothing so small that I could call it a wound. I'd had my arms and legs ripped off, and the skin torn from my entire body. The pain would not fade. The scars left were indelible.

Everything had changed from when the other three were still alive.

We couldn't go back. There was no going back.

Hayashi didn't move away from the door. He might have been trying to say something to me. Might have been trying to comfort me. Might have been trying to cheer me up. Maybe I should have told Hayashi that none of it would help. But, if I did that, it would hurt him. Hayashi had lost his comrades, too. He had to be beside himself with grief. I didn't want to torment him any further. In truth, I should have been the one cheering up Hayashi. If it were possible, I wanted to do it. But I couldn't. Couldn't do anything. I couldn't imagine myself having the right to do anything. The only thing I could do was continue to sit there with my mouth shut.

2. Self-awareness

Whatever the case was, in regards to myself and what I was thinking, or how I couldn't think at all, none of it mattered. When it came time to work, I had to do it right. Had to change gears. I didn't need to be me, I could just commit to my role. In fact, I had to separate me from me. To pull out just the part of me that was a priest. I was not Merry. I was just a priest.

The clan Orion was famous. Their leader, Shinohara, was a likable guy, and the others were capable volunteer soldiers. Not a bad lot at all.

The white cape I was given bore the seven stars that were the symbol of Orion. When I wore it, I felt like I could become someone else. When Hayashi wore the cape, he looked like another person, too.

The people in Orion were considerate of Hayashi and me. We joined a party

led by a woman named Tanamori, and we faced goblins in the Old City of Damuro. It was strange for a group of veterans led by someone like Tanamori to go to Damuro. It was clearly less a test of skill, and more a warm-up for us. It was like going to physical rehab.

Tanamori had a soft face, and yet she was taller than I was. She was built like a warrior, yet her weapon of choice was a short staff. She was a priest with experience as a warrior, and along with Yokoi the ex-thief and fighter, Shingen the mage, and the warriors Matsuyagi and Hayashi, we had a party of six. Matsuyagi took the front with Hayashi and Yokoi, while Tanamori and I protected Shingen. Yokoi was nimble and lightly equipped, so he could come back and cover the rear if the need arose.

Though, when they saw Matsuyagi, who was 180 centimeters tall, swinging around a bastard sword, the goblins were ready to run away. Hayashi and Yokoi would charge the anxious goblins, and Shingen would look for an opportunity to pummel them with magic. That decided most of our battles. Once the goblins broke, it was a matter of how to finish them off and keep them from escaping. At that point, it was a one-sided massacre.

There was nothing for me to do. I just watched as an unconcerned onlooker while Matsuyagi scattered the front-line goblins. Hayashi seemed full of life, even if not to the degree he had been before. Even that scene only felt like something I was watching in the distance.

The people in Orion were being considerate of us. It was too much to ask us to take part in an intense battle so soon after the shock we had experienced. First, they wanted us to take on enemies we could easily handle, in order to regain our confidence. At the same time, they were hoping to bring back our combat instincts.

They were probably doing the right thing. In their position, I'm sure we would have done the same.

It seemed to be working for Hayashi. When Matsuyagi praised him, saying, "Good charge," he even smiled. It was a reserved smile, of course, and Hayashi glanced at me afterward, an awkward look on his face. But having always been a warrior with a competitive side, facing enemies and swinging his sword in

earnest must have been the right road to recovery for Hayashi. He would probably get over this. I believed, wholeheartedly, that that was a good thing.

I in no way resented Hayashi for getting me out of there. I didn't hate him.

Hayashi was my precious comrade. He was the only one I had left. I wanted him to cheer up quickly, and if there was something I could do to help, I wanted to do it.

Not that I could imagine there was.

Around the time we exterminated our third band of goblins, I was forced to realize something I hadn't before now. I wish I hadn't. I never wanted to know.

This was an irredeemably ugly part of myself. By having Tanamori, a priest far superior to myself, at my side, I became viscerally aware of how arrogant and wrong I had been. I had essentially brought that irreversible failure upon us.

Matsuyagi, Yokoi, and Shingen all trusted Tanamori implicitly. If anything happened, Tanamori would heal them. Tanamori was a firm presence behind them, occasionally giving short, precise directions. I didn't doubt Tanamori, either.

Big, tough Matsuyagi who would move forward, but never to the point he was being careless, was the one Yokoi, Shingen, and even Tanamori relied on most.

Everyone counted on Yokoi's quick wits, and all of Shingen's comrades knew he would use his magic effectively, right where it was most needed.

Hayashi might not have had a full grasp of all their quirks yet, but he hung on with an inborn seriousness and diligence. His comrades looked fondly on Hayashi's effort. They accepted him, and were trying to support him.

There was no place for me. I might as well not have been there. They didn't need me.

If we were to fight more powerful enemies, I would have to do something. There would be something I could do. That much might have been true. But that wasn't the issue. By being put into an unnecessary role, I had been made to realize something.

What I had been like before.

I thought I was doing an okay—no, if I’m being honest, I thought I was doing a pretty good job.

I tried to do everything I could. It felt wrong not to. The more I did, the more fulfilled I felt. Everyone praised me. I was needed. It made me happy. I was over the moon. I was doing it for everyone. For my comrades. For the party. For all of us. That’s what I thought. But I was wrong.

That wasn’t it.

I wanted to feel fulfilled. I wanted to be praised. I wanted to feel needed. I wanted that happiness. I wanted more and more of it. I searched for it, insatiably.

Michiki, Ogu, Mutsumi, Hayashi. Look at me. Hey, I’m pretty great, aren’t I? I can do this, and I can do that, too. I can do anything. Praise me. Like me. Love me. Give me a place to be.

It wasn’t for them.

It was all for me.

That was why when no one needed me, like now, I sulked. *Enough. I don’t want to be here. I mean, these people don’t need me.* That’s what I was thinking.

This was me.

Just a narcissist who wanted to be recognized, reaffirmed, fussed over, valued.

How disgusting.

I didn’t use magic once that day. I just stood there, watching. Tanamori and Hayashi tried to talk to me a few times. They were worried. I must have been in a worrisome state. I tried to cover it. But I had no idea what I could do to look normal.

“Why don’t we go into the New City tomorrow?” Tanamori suggested as we were about to part. The Old City was way too tame. This wouldn’t even work as rehabilitation unless we fought some more serious battles in the New City. That’s how I took it. It might have been exactly that. Maybe something would

change for me tomorrow. I might calm down, and be able to act a little better.

I wasn't expecting I would. But I had to get my act together. Had to do what I needed to. That's how I felt.

I couldn't sleep. I stepped into the New City of Damuro the next day without getting so much as a wink of it. It felt like I was tagging along. Hayashi quickly fit into the group, and I was the lone guest. Matsuyagi and Yokoi never did more than greet me, and Tanamori and Shingen didn't know what to do with me. Hayashi seemed frustrated, too. *You've got to know you can't stay like that.* That's what it looked like he wanted to say.

If that's what he thought, he should have said it. But Hayashi wouldn't. He felt guilty. Hayashi was the one who had saved me. It was his only option, and Hayashi had done the right thing. He probably had no regrets. At the same time, Hayashi understood. That it wasn't what I had wanted. Hayashi wasn't responsible for this. He'd done nothing wrong. But I wasn't grateful to him. I couldn't say, "Thank you for saving me."

The goblins of the New City were armed just like the human volunteer soldiers. They acted in an organized fashion, and when they were outnumbered, they were guaranteed to call for backup. We only entered the very edge of the New City, no farther. Even that was enough to bring on battles on an entirely different level of intensity from before, but it wasn't enough to wake me up. I used Cure after battle several times. Aside from that I just stood by Tanamori's side, not moving, and unable to even follow the situation. Even though I was doing nothing, when I saw Hayashi trading blows with a goblin, my breathing became ragged. I got short of breath, and there was a tightening in my chest. I couldn't bear to look at Hayashi. But if I looked away, where was I going to look? Hayashi was fighting. What was I doing? Hayashi was trying to move forward, but what did I want to do?

For three days, I went to the New City of Damuro, and became aware of the fact I'd become a useless priest. I told Hayashi I was leaving Orion. Then I apologized to Shinohara, and lied, telling him I would try things on my own for a while.

3. Individual Freedom

I found an inn and cleared out of the lodging house. It was a place where only women could stay, so even Hayashi wouldn't come visit.

It was a lie when I said I'd try things on my own. I had no intent of trying. But I couldn't just do nothing, either. Just living cost money. What I had left at the Yorozu Deposit Company would run out in the not-so-distant future.

I had no leads, so I tried going to the Volunteer Soldier Corps office. *I'll ask Britney for advice*, I thought, but when the time came, I couldn't even bring myself to enter the office. As I was standing right in front of the building, "Hey, you, what's the matter?" someone called out to me from behind. When I turned, there was a smiling man with the look of a warrior about him.

"You know, you've been standing there a while. I was thinking it was weird. You can see why I'd be concerned, right?"

The man was a typical specimen, but he was missing one of his front teeth, and one of his incisors on the right side, which made him look a little silly. He had a weird name, too. It wasn't his real name, but he introduced himself as Maron. All I told him was that I'd left my party, and so I was looking for work.

"In that case," Maron said, casually gearing up to make me an offer, "I'm in what's called the Free Union. How about it? Want to take a look? It's not a clan, though. Freelance volunteer soldiers participate on their own terms, forming and disbanding parties whenever. It's that sort of loose association. You'd be free to come and go from the union itself, too, of course. You can try putting together a party, and if it works out, you stick together. That's a thing that happens sometimes, so it might be a good way to search for comrades."

It sounded perfect for me. Maron took me to a bar in Celestial Alley where he said the members of this Free Union hung out, and he introduced me to everyone. It wasn't as big as the famous Sherry's Tavern, but it was a fairly large place, and there were maybe twenty patrons. It seemed that more than half of them were involved with this Free Union.

"Nobody's uptight or anything in this group. I mean it. You can just take it easy."

That's what Maron said, but I felt tense, and spent most of the time looking down at the floor. Even when people talked to me, I couldn't respond properly. Was having one person like that around enough to make things awkward? I was worried about that, but acting normal and putting on a show of being cheerful were both beyond me.

"Well, for now, will you try joining a party with me? I'll just round up four other people at random. Let's try going to the Cyrene Mines tomorrow."

"The Cyrene Mines...!" I blurted out despite myself. The bar went quiet, and an incredible awkwardness stabbed into my heart like a thousand needles.

"...Sorry. I'm not quite up to the Cyrene Mines."

"Uh, sure. Got it. Yeah. Well, let's go somewhere else, then."

Laughing, Maron assured me it was all fine.

"Leave this to me. I know quite a few good spots. Though, it'll be a bit of a long trip. That okay? It is, right? It'll be a few nights... Yeah, it takes a day there, and a day back, so three nights, I guess. Get yourself ready for that, and we'll meet at the north gate tomorrow, okay?"

I was uneasy. But I steeled myself, thinking it had to be done. Maybe I hadn't lied to Shinohara after all. I had honestly left Orion with the intention to try my best. If I was in Orion—if I was with Hayashi, I couldn't face forward. If I was looking forward, I would always see Hayashi's back there. For me, that was a bizarre sight. Not that Hayashi was there. The fact that *only* Hayashi was there. It was unbearable. If Hayashi was there, obviously Michiki and Ogu had to be, too, and it was just wrong for Mutsumi to not be beside me. But they weren't there. My comrades weren't anywhere. They would never return. I was painfully reminded of that every single second. That was hard on me. Harder than I could bear.

I wanted to give it one last go. In order to survive for the comrades I had let die. That's why I left Orion, and left Hayashi. I felt bad for Hayashi, and the people in Orion who had been so good to me, but it was all I could do.

The next morning, when we gathered at the north gate, there was Maron the warrior, Ryuki the hunter, Ohjika the other hunter, Ponkichi the thief, Jin'e the ex-paladin, and me, for a total of six people. The party leader wasn't Maron, but

Jin'e, who was thirty-three, or something like that, and the oldest in the group. Ryuki and Ohjika were thin, and both carried these large bows. They looked like brothers. Ponkichi was rather short, and looked quick, like you would expect from a thief.

Though Jin'e was the leader, Maron was our guide. We left Alterna and headed north. If we continued in that direction, we would enter a forest. Once we were out of the woods, there was Deadhead Watching Keep, where the orcs had stationed a force to keep an eye on any movements by the humans. Maron diverted around both the forest and Deadhead Watching Keep, instead choosing a route through the Quickwind Plains. It was roughly twelve kilometers away. We weren't moving at that quick of a pace, so it took a little under four hours.

"Ryuki, Ohjika."

Jin'e gestured with his chin, and the two hunters moved up to the front, while Maron moved back, taking a position next to me. Suddenly, Maron got very talkative.

"Are you curious about how Jin'e's an ex-paladin? You are, right?"

"Well, yes."

It was true that an ex-paladin was an oddity. It wasn't that uncommon for a volunteer soldier to leave one guild and then join another. However, in that case, they referred to themselves as an ex-paladin warrior, a warrior who was once a paladin, or something like that. Jin'e, at first glance, was a paladin. Though his cape was black, he wore whitish armor, and his helm was white, too. However, there was nothing but scratch marks where the hexagram on the chest had once been. He had likely scraped it off. He said he was thirty-three, but there were streaks of white in the long hair that he had lazily combed back, and the white hairs in his beard stood out, too. He kind of looked closer to forty.

"You see, Merry, paladins can use light magic like priests can. But there's a difference in the light magic each can use. You're a priest, so I'm sure you know, but—"

"Paladins can't heal their own wounds."

“Yeah, that. But the thing is, there’s this spell called Crime. It’s a last resort of sorts, I guess you could say. It’s an incredible spell that heals all of the paladin’s wounds instantly. Like Sacrament, only self-targeted.”

“The price is losing the blessing of Lumiaris, though,” Jin’e interjected, “I used it once. I just didn’t want to die.”

“So, he was out of a job,” Maron said with a smirk and a shrug.

“Any paladin who uses Crime is automatically expelled from the paladins’ guild. But you can only stay in the guild if you’re alive to begin with. He managed to survive, so it was time for a change. To be a warrior, or something else. That’s what I’d have done, at least. But Jin’e’s different. Since then, he hasn’t been in any guild. So, that’s why he’s an ex-paladin.”

“I’m past the point where I want to beg anyone for lessons. That’s all,” Jin’e said with a self-mocking laugh, but there was a look about him like he had lost something precious, and bore wounds that would never heal there.

Still, the man lived on. More than that, he made no attempt to hide his wounds. He lived with them exposed.

Would I be able to live with my wounds like that? I wasn’t confident. But I definitely wanted to.

Wounds hurt, and they’re unsightly. If I can cover them up, I want to. I want to erase them. If possible, I want to make it so they never existed.

But apparently that wasn’t how I really felt about it.

Scabs form over wounds, peel away, and the scars gradually fade. The pain lessens with time, too. I don’t need that. I’m fine with the pain.

That’s probably what I was thinking.

With the hunters leading the way to help us avoid dangerous beasts and routes, we walked until late in the afternoon before reaching the place.

It was a valley. A dry gulch, you might have called it. There was no stream flowing through it. The valley formed a cross shape, facing to the northeast. The southeast, southwest, and northwest were sheer cliffs that we could not descend, but the northeast was a gentle slope, so it seemed like we could get

down to the bottom of the valley there.

No, it didn't just seem like it, we definitely could. Through there was the only way down to the bottom.

It was a rather deep valley, and quite dark at the bottom.

Even from the lip of the valley, I could somewhat make out the forms writhing down there.

"...Servants of the No-Life King."

"You got it." Maron clapped his hands happily. "This is just my educated guess, but zombies and skeletons must hate the daylight. That's why they're generally roaming around at night. So, when morning comes, they try to rest in a dark place. That just happened to be here—is what I'm thinking it might be. Only bushes grow in this area, and there's no tall hills, let alone a mountain. This is the only place around here with a lot of darkness, so this was the natural outcome. That is, this is the only place I know of, but I'm sure there's others just like it."

"...What will we do? If we go down—"

"It'll be dangerous, yeah. Of course. If they all rush us, that's risky. That's why we choose an appropriate target, and pull them up. So, Ryuki and I act as the baiters. The other four lie in wait wherever. Then, once we pull them in, everyone takes them out. Well, it's probably easier to just show you, Merry. Everyone but you has some experience with this, so you don't have to worry. Just watch for now. It's already late, so we'll just do it once for today."

Jin'e, Ohjika, Ponkichi and I set up northeast of the valley, and Maron and Ryuki nimbly made their way down the slope.

We stayed put. No one, myself included, spoke. Maron was chatty, but the others weren't so talkative. That helped. I had talked a lot with Michiki and the others. Everyone had loved to chat, and I had been no exception. But that wasn't because I was naturally talkative; rather, I had just jived with the group, and it was fun. Now, I could remain silent for hours. Not talking didn't pain me in the slightest. In fact, if there was no need to speak, I kept my mouth shut.

Some time passed before Maron and Ryuki ran back towards us. There was

something chasing after the two of them. Was it human? It seemed awfully small. Also, it was unsteady on its feet, its body tilting to one side.

“That’s a zombie, all right,” Ponkichi whispered, letting out a creepy little laugh. The little man didn’t just have a slovenly, ill-mannered look on his face, his equipment and gestures were lowly, too. “It’s a runt, so maybe it was a dwarf. That, or a human or elf kid.”

“You’re a runt, too,” Ohjika said, poking at Ponkichi. Ohjika, who resembled Ryuki, gave off an impression of cleanliness so long as he kept his mouth shut, but the moment he opened it to say something, his meanness showed through.

“Prepare,” Jin’e said shortly, and Ponkichi and Ohjika readied their weapons.

Still, it was strange. Why had I never thought about it before now?

Zombies.

The soulless, heartless remnants of the dead that moved under the No-Life King’s curse.

Michiki. Ogu. Mutsumi. My comrades had lost their lives in the Cyrene Mines.

Hayashi and I hadn’t made it out easily. We had been a dazed and confused mess, desperately struggling, so I didn’t clearly remember, but I was sure it had taken us a while to get out of the mines. More than a full day. Even after we returned to Alterna, we were in no shape to think properly.

We wanted to give them a proper burial, of course. To bring back the bodies, cremate them, and build a grave on the hill. But as much as we wanted to, as much as we had to, it was already too late. Hayashi and me returning to the mines to search for the three of them? That was totally impossible. The three of them had been taken out by the infamous Death Spots. It would be highly risky to hunt for the bodies. Besides, as a priest, I was aware of the terrifying curse that could activate in just three days after their deaths. Even if we solicited help from others, we wouldn’t make it in time.

I dreamed about it repeatedly. Michiki, Ogu, and Mutsumi, standing before me as moving corpses. The three were dead, so we could no longer talk. But I could hear them. *Why did you abandon us? Why did you run away?* they would ask me. I had no answers. I could only keep apologizing. Finally, the three would

attack.

Each time I had the dream, I felt like I was tainting the pride of my fallen comrades, and I couldn't forgive myself. If they resented me, hated me for it, I could hardly blame them. But the three I knew would never have blamed me, even if it was my fault. And yet, when I saw them in my dreams, they criticized me. I was unfairly degrading them. If I wanted to punish myself, I should have been the one to do it. Despite that, I made them shoulder the burden.

I wasn't fair.

I was mean, and despicable.

The left leg of the zombie chasing Maron and Ryuki was, on closer inspection, close to being torn off. It had a wound on its lower back that looked like it went all the way to the spine. That was why it could only shamble like that.

Whether the zombie had been human or some other race, it was probably the same as Michiki, Ogu, and Mutsumi. It met an unwanted fate, and, left unburied, it was transformed into a servant of the No-Life King.

Michiki and the rest might be wandering the Cyrene Mines like that.

I couldn't stand to look at the zombie, so I turned away. My vision was spinning. My heart ached. My ears were ringing.

"Do it," Jin'e gave the order.

I didn't move a step. I couldn't even stand to watch the scene unfold.

The men's voices echoed, along with other noises. They weren't so much cutting it down as pulverizing it.

"Easy peasy," Maron laughed.

"Must've chosen a good target," Ryuki said.

The other men agreed.

I was looking down. I didn't crouch. I was still standing somehow.

"Merry?"

The voice calling my name came from so close it caught me by surprise. I practically jumped back as I looked up. It was Maron. "What?" I tried to say. My

voice failed me, though, so I nodded.

“What’s wrong? You okay?”

“...Yes.” I forced the word out, adding, “It’s nothing.”

“Yeah? Well, okay then.” Maron backed off easily. Had I managed to hide it? I wasn’t sure.

The zombie had apparently been a dwarf, because it had several items made from mithril, a metal only the dwarves could mine and work. One of them was a ring, and Maron passed it to me.

“Here, I’ll give this one to you, Merry. —That’s all right, yeah, Jin’e?”

“Do as you please.”

“Everyone else fine with that, too? I’m not hearing any objections. So, there you go. Take it. Call it a present for joining the Free Union. I hear mithril rings ward against demons.”

I put the ring into my pouch without really looking at it. I didn’t particularly want it. I didn’t need it, but Maron was sure to make a fuss if I refused. He was a pain to deal with. That’s why I decided to quietly accept it.

Why had I joined the Free Union and come to this Zombie Valley anyway? Essentially, I did it for the money. To earn. I could surely sell the mithril ring for a good price. If he said he was giving it to me, I’d take it. I didn’t need to be grateful, though. If I thought of it as a debt, I would have to repay it in some form. That was probably dangerous. They might take advantage of me.

We set up camp in a spot that was about an hour away from Zombie Valley. Maron and the rest only had one tent, and just as I was wondering what I was going to do, they said I should sleep in the tent by myself. The men would rough it. They would take turns on watch, too, so I was free to sleep until morning.

“You don’t need to give me special treatment...”

“You *are* special,” Maron said jokingly, “I mean, you’re the only girl here. We’ve gotta treat you special. I couldn’t ever treat you like one of the guys.”

“Do you want to sleep next to me?” Jin’e said with a thin, mocking laugh, “Can you get naked and change in front of us? Or take a piss? If not, we have no

choice but to treat you special. That's a given. You should just accept it."

The blunt way he put it actually made it easier. I accepted it, and decided to use the tent alone. Still, even after I forced down the trail rations I had brought with me and laid down, I couldn't get to sleep.

The thin fabric of the tent was all that separated me from five men I didn't really know. This was the Quickwind Plains, too. Far from Alterna. If I thought about it, this situation was clearly dangerous.

That meant I hadn't been thinking about it. I just tagged along without a care. I'd been an idiot. A complete and utter fool.

Maybe my guard had been down because Michiki, Ogu, and Hayashi weren't the kind of men who would ever do something like that. I had honestly never had *that sort* of terrible experience, and I'd never been frightened of it. At least, not in Grimgar.

I couldn't be sure about before. I didn't remember it, after all. But maybe it wasn't true that I had never experienced it.

Was I like a moth, drawn to the flame? Had I walked into a trap?

Once I began trembling in fear, it wouldn't stop. They were building a campfire outside. I could tell there was light outside the tent, but I couldn't see their shadows. Still, I sensed their presence. If I listened, I could hear their voices. Ryuki and Ohjika were the ones who were awake, huh? They were bantering about some nonsense and laughing. Were Maron, Jin'e, and Ponkichi asleep? Ryuki and Ohjika seemed like, if they were together, they could do anything, no matter how terrible. That was only my imagination, of course. I might have been off-base, and if I was, I was being far more horrible than they were. It was a fact that I was a terrible, selfish person, though.

Still, Ryuki and Ohjika weren't the type to take charge. I felt like, rather than think or act for themselves, they were more likely to be in on someone else's plot.

I didn't know Ponkichi that well. Though, the other four clearly looked down on him. Yet Ponkichi seemed not to mind. He enjoyed being teased, and even showed signs of feeling at ease at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Jin'e. What about him? Even after losing the protection of Lumiaris, he had maintained his integrity and continued on as an ex-paladin. He looked and acted rough, but he might have been fairly honorable. He wasn't actually a bad guy. That was the feeling I got.

Really, it was Maron who seemed suspicious. He'd been the one to call out to me, after all. I mean, what kind of name was Maron? Even his name was suspicious. That relaxed attitude. That glibness. So far, he hadn't done anything weird to me. He'd been kind. That was suspicious, too.

Taking care not to make any noise, I pulled out the mithril ring. Was this proof of his ulterior motives? If so, it was too blatant. Did he really think he could get my attention with something he stole off a zombie?

He had said it warded against demons. Did that apply to dream demons, too? If I wore it to sleep, would I be spared the nightmares?

This was ridiculous. Trying to escape from nightmares after I let my comrades die. Shouldn't I have been grateful that Michiki, Ogu, and Mutsumi appeared in my dreams at all? Normally, I shouldn't have been able to see them even there. Because I had no right to show them my face.

Maybe I deserve to be roughed up a little. If Maron's planning something, fine. He can do what he wants. I don't care what happens to me.

If I had said something like that, Michiki would have gotten angry. Ogu would have been sad. Mutsumi would have gently reprimanded me.

Scold me.

Say, "Merry, what are you doing? Don't be so careless, get your act together!"

Please...

I might have drifted off for a bit. No, not a bit, it was probably an hour or two. I didn't dream. At some point, I had clutched the mithril ring. I didn't want to think this ring was what spared me the nightmares. I'd gone without sleep for so long that I didn't feel rested. My head felt heavy. I was nauseous. Everything felt unpleasant.

I tried to sit up. I wanted to get out of the tent and get some fresh air. At that

moment, the door to the tent moved just a little. I called it a door, but it was just a flap of cloth with some clasps on the inside of the tent that allowed it to be kept shut. It wasn't like a door with a key. If you stuck a finger through the seam, it would open easily, and you could cut the strings from outside, too.

Someone had stuck a hand through the seam, and they were looking inside through the gap. At me.

I reflexively pretended to be asleep. Was that good? Shouldn't I have gotten up, and asked them what they thought they were doing?

Whoever it was pulled their hand back. They moved away from the tent. It seemed they'd gone to sit by the fire.

"...How was she?"

"She's sleeping. What do you plan to do with that woman?"

Maron and Jin'e. Apparently Jin'e was the one who peeked into the tent.

"I dunno. Hmm. I think she's hurting right now. If I can win her over, I want to. See, I prefer it be consensual, rather than rape, you know?"

"Like I care about your preferences."

"But, man, doing it by force? That can be nice sometimes, too, sure. We did it with the last one."

"That wasn't a bad time."

"You're a simple brute. I bet you can't get into it if you aren't forcing them, right? I mean, you love passing them around, don't you?"

"I don't know how anyone can stand to be kind to women."

"Whaaa? Really? It's nice. Having a lovey-dovey good time with a cute girl. Merry's a real beauty, too. It'd be fun flirting with her. For sure. It'd be fun."

"Why waste so much time just to be able to do a girl?"

"There's a solid return on the time invested, that's why. I mean, you just have no emotion, huh, Jin'e!"

"If I've tasted a woman once, I've had enough."

“Well, I can understand getting tired of them. In that sense, it’s easier when it doesn’t leave a bad aftertaste.”

“That woman will never go for you.”

“You think...?”

“I still have an eye for these things. Not that I need it.”

“Oh, yeah? For all your lack of interest, you’re sharp about this stuff. Is it the difference in life experience? Hmm. So, I can’t win her over, huh? Then you want to just do her now?”

Maron said that like it was nothing, but I thought I might suffocate. Bad. That’s what this was. No, it was beyond bad. It wasn’t just Maron. Jin’e, too. Pretty honorable? Not a bad guy? Hah. From what I’d just heard, he was a serial rapist. Even Maron, who’d apparently been trying to seduce me, was more humane than that. Not that I even remotely wanted to call him “humane.”

This is no good. They’re going to get me. I’m going to be assaulted. What can I do?

If I stay in here, I’m trapped like a rat.

That’s right. I shouldn’t stay in the tent. I have to run. I’ve made up my mind. I’m getting out of here.

Breathing only through my nose, my mind raced. Only the two of them were up. Maron and Jin’e. Two men. If I recalled, after starting the fire, they had taken off their armor. It was going to be hard to shake them if I ran. But, even if I caught them by surprise, how would that go? These weren’t common people. They were volunteer soldiers. They had stamina. I didn’t want to get into a race with them.

The start was going to be essential. I needed to put distance between us with a good starting dash, and make them give up. This was the Quickwind Plains, and it was late at night, too. They wouldn’t pursue me too far.

I had a plan. I was going to give up on my stuff. It’d only get in the way. I’d only take the money.

Maron and Jin’e hadn’t moved yet. I could act first.

I pressed on my chest, as if trying to force my heart, which wanted to escape out my mouth, back into place. This was no time to hesitate. I undid the clasps with shaking fingers. It was silent outside the tent.

I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. Of what? How is this scary compared to that time?

This was nothing compared to then. Death Spots. He was a million times stronger than them.

I got out of the tent.

Maron and Jin'e were sitting opposite one another by the campfire. They both looked towards me in unison.

Ryuki, Ohjika, and Ponkichi were lying a little ways away. Asleep, like I had thought.

For a moment, Maron's eyes went wide, then, "...Huh?" He put on a smile. "What's wrong, Merry? Did you wake up?"

Jin'e gazed at me with eyes that seemed glazed, yet at the same time harbored a dangerously dull light. This man was more cautious than Maron. He likely suspected their conversation had been overheard.

"Kind of..."

That was all I said before lowering my eyes and approaching the fire. Was this going to work? I had to do it. "I'm exhausted," I added, sighing. I must have looked it. Even I could manage this sort of acting.

I made a point of not looking either Maron or Jin'e in the eye. If they saw my eyes, Jin'e especially, they might see through me. That's why, with my eyes down, I went over close to the fire—to sit down next to Maron and Jin'e.

Obviously, I wasn't actually going to sit. First, I kicked Jin'e in the face as hard as I could with the bottom of my boot. Without missing a beat, I planted a roundhouse kick in Maron's flank.

Then I took off running. Just trying to get away from the fire. The direction didn't matter one bit. Maron and Jin'e were shouting something. That didn't matter, either. I didn't turn back. I focused on running as fast as I could. Even as

my throat and lungs burned, even as my stomach ached, my legs never wobbled.

“Merry, you’re always so extreme,” Mutsumi once told me, “No matter what you do, you never take half measures. That’s a strong point, but also a weak one...”

How did I respond when she pointed that out?

“Am I? I don’t think so.” I believe that’s what I said.

But, given it was Mutsumi who said it, Mutsumi who observed people closely, and was so thoughtful, I think she was right.

I was an extreme person who hated half measures. Just enough? Approximately right? I couldn’t ever do things like that. It was zero or one for me. No, more like zero or one hundred. Everything was completely right, or totally wrong. I loved something, or I hated it. There was nothing that was in between for me.

“It’s not good to be too fastidious.” That’s another thing Mutsumi once said to me. “It can be harder on you than anyone.”

“I’m not really fastidious at all,” I responded.

That wasn’t what I was.

I was simply stubborn and inflexible. That’s why I couldn’t bend.

When I was out of breath, my body hurt all over, and I couldn’t move another step, finally, my legs stopped.

No one would come after me. I was alone. I felt like I would be devoured by the massive starry sky. It hurt even just to stand. I sat down on the ground. For now, I needed to catch my breath. As I was desperately trying to do so, a beast howled somewhere in the distance. I jumped a little, and my breath froze. *It’s okay*, I thought. The voice was far away. But there was another howl. This time, it felt closer than before. I looked around the area. I couldn’t see anything. No matter how many stars there were, it was still dark. Too dark. If only there were a moon. I had never longed for the red moon more than I did now.

Should I move? Should I stay here? I couldn’t decide. I was a priest. Not a

hunter. There was no way I would know.

The beast howled. This time, it was clearly closer. Not right beside me, but definitely quite close.

This is no good.

I can't stay here. I'll be eaten by wild animals. I don't want that. I don't want to die like that.

I stood up.

But which way should I go...?

The beast howled. I decided to move away from that howling. Should I avoid making footsteps? Should I keep quiet? Was it all the same to the beast? It could probably find me by scent. Was there no escape then?

I might have been cornered. The beast had already identified me as prey, and started the hunt.

Help.

It was no good.

Nobody was going to help me. There was no one here. I was alone.

Finally, it painfully sank in.

I'm all alone.

4. The Inside of His Head Is Waradeganf

While I was at Sherry's Tavern, sipping distilled liquor from the mainland, "Hey, hey, hey!" a strangely frivolous man approached me.

"Hey!" The man raised his right hand. He had a ceramic mug in his left. Everything, from his voice, to his face, to his appearance, to the way he acted, was nothing if not frivolous. Was there any man the word "frivolous" was more fit to describe? This man was like an avatar of frivolity.

I looked down at the counter, regretting that I had unwittingly looked in this man's direction.

“Hey!” the man cheerfully shouted.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!”

...Stubborn.

I was making a point of ignoring him. The man had to know that.

“Hey, hey, hey! Heyheyheyheyheyyyy! Hey...?”

The tone of his voice weakened, as expected. It was about time he gave up.

“Oh! Did you just think I was going to give up? Well, no! Not me, I’m different. That’s what separates me from your average Joe, y’know? Well, *do* you know? Just kidding!”

I sighed. Or rather, the sigh came out on its own. What was with this guy? He was frivolous and irritating on a level that exceeded my wildest imagination.

Lately, when I’ve been out drinking in the bar like this, very few volunteer soldiers have called out to me without cause. If they had business with me, though, that was another matter. If their party’s priest had suddenly fallen ill, for instance. Or if their priest had been poached. Or if their priest had gotten fed up with them and run off. Or, in the better cases, if they still had a priest, but they were planning to go somewhere a bit dangerous, so they wanted one more for safety. To be there in an emergency, to fill a vacancy, or as a sub healer. Those were my roles, and there was a fair amount of demand for them. But not much supply.

That was because, normally, since they were a necessity for any party, there were plenty of people willing to take a priest. Even if they were a little incompetent, they wouldn’t find themselves left out. When a priest was working freelance, a party or clan would try to recruit them in no time. Though, even without such an invitation, a priest could bring up the idea themselves, and they would get into a party with little trouble.

I had refused all offers to join a clan. That was why, if volunteer soldiers were going to approach me about anything, it was to have me fill a vacancy, or to act as a sub healer. Half the reason I was here drinking at Sherry’s was for business. Basically, I was looking for work.

I could earn enough to keep myself fed this way, so I had no complaints. I did have a goal of sorts, too, and I was working towards it, but I had no view as to when I could accomplish it. I had no plans for changing my lifestyle. I didn't see any need to.

I didn't want anyone to get in my way.

Least of all this playboy.

Without looking at the playboy, and being careful not to put any emotion into the word, "Disappear," I told him, "I'm not in the mood to talk with someone like you."

"Whaaaat?!"

The playboy, for some reason, spun around three times on the spot. It was a sharp spin.

"You don't want to talk to me-buina?"

"...Buina?"

Uh-oh. I couldn't help but show interest. The playboy did not miss his chance to keep pushing.

"Okay! I get it, I get it, I get it! I so get it! I see, like, right through you! Yay, yay! Yahhh!"

"Wh... What do you get?"

"Right! I'll keep this brief! What I get is that I don't get it!"

The playboy, for some reason, said that with a poised look. I was taken aback. I had never encountered a man who could put so much effort into such a vacuous and empty conversation before.

"...If you get that you don't get it, then go already. If you want to talk business, that changes things, though."

"Business? What's business? Nessbusi?! We're gonna talk Nessbusi here?!"

"N-Nessbusi...?"

"No, but seriously now, it's, like, totally weird, you know?" The playboy sat himself down in the seat next to me. "A lot of stuff happens in life. A

lottalottalotta stuff, yeah?!”

“...Lottalotta?”

“Yeah! That! This place is no pair of dice, huh?! You get me?! Huh? What was your name again?”

“Merry...”

“Yeah, that was it! Merry, Merry, quite contrary! Whew, that’s a good name!”

“...I don’t think I told you before, though.”

“You hadn’t?! No way, seriously?! Yeahhhh, truth is, I knew I hadn’t heard it yet. Sowwie. I said that, like, knowing I didn’t know. That’s my technique. Get it?”

“I... don’t know what I’m supposed to get.”

“Let’s be cheery! This place is no paradise, but the inside of my head is. Waradeganf! Right?”

“...Sorry for not being cheery.”

“Don’t be! You’ve done noooothing wrong! In fact, it’s A-okay! It goes sweet, sweeter, sweetest, am I right?! Hey, hey, hey, Merry-san, will you be my lovely rib?”

“Rib...?”

“Oops, got it wrong! Not my rib, my girlfriend! My lover! That, or my wife!”

“How could you possibly mix those up...?”

“Yeahhhh, that’s top secret!”

“I’ll pass.”

“Gowhuh! Well then, let’s start as friends!”

“I don’t need friends.”

“Whooooa! Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoooooa! Don’t say such a sad, sad thing! No, no! Let’s be friends! I’ll be just your friend for life! I, like, really badly wanna-wanna be your friend! I’ve got to be!”

He pleaded for me to be his friend, looking like he might get down on all fours

and beg, but I didn't let that budge my heart one millimeter. But, even though this man was incredibly silly, he might have been surprisingly serious about this.

"I can't be your friend. I honestly don't need friends. Only work partners," I told him.

"Okay!"

That was fast, I thought, but if I gave him a reaction, I'd feel like I had lost. Hold on, was this a matter of victory or defeat here? I didn't really know. But, wait, he wasn't leaving. He knocked back his mug, downed the rest of the beer-like drink inside, and told the server, "Get me another ice-cold reeb!" He was ordering another drink. What did that mean? Was he planning to stay here...?

"Merry-san. I get you. I'll give up on the friends thing! Because, like, I'm a man! We're not friends! We're not boyfriend and girlfriend! We're not husband and wife! How about, like, parent and child...?"

"Not likely."

"I figured. It'd be a bit awkward. Well, how about siblings, then...?"

"We're not."

"Thought so. Okay, how's this? We could be neighbors?"

"...Neighbors?"

"Love thy horse! Was that how the saying goes? Huh? It's horse now? No, not horse, neighbor! Neeeeeighbooor...! Sowwie, sowwie. I'm, like, totally sorry. Man, I'm feeling really sharp tonight. Sharp magic number fifteen! Why fifteen? I don't even know! Bokeracho! Yay! Anyway, my reeb's here. Merry-san, Merry-san, Merry—oh, can I drop the honorific? I can?! It's fine since we're neighbors, right? Wahey! Break the limits! Can we open the door to a new world? Open the doooooor! Oh, yeah!"

I was starting to get a headache for some reason... How could he string so many nonsense words together? What was going on inside this man's head?

"Wah!" The man suddenly cringed. He went very pale, and his whole body shuddered.

"...Wh-What? Is something... wrong?"

“I just realized something, like, totally devastating, yo...”

“Yo...?”

The man nodded, and then, laying his mug down on the counter, he covered his face with both hands.

“...Man, I’m nuts. Like, seriously. How could I forget something so important...?”

“So... what is it?”

“My name.”

The man stuck his tongue out of the corner of his mouth, closing one eye and striking a strange pose.

“My name is Kikkawa! Whew! Totally forgot to introduce myself there. That was a close one! Almost left you with a mysterious memory with no name! That’d just be cruel, wouldn’t it? It’d feel bad, right? Right, right? Wahey! So, I’m Kikkawa! Merry, let me say, nice to meet yoo-hoo.”

“N-Nice to...”

I shut my mouth. That was close. I’d almost said, “Nice to meet yoo-hoo.” I kinda... really didn’t want to say that.

Kikkawa wasn’t a familiar face. He might have been a rookie.

He’s dangerous, I thought, But not in the usual way.

I caught my breath and took a sip of distilled liquor. The powerful alcohol burned my throat as it slid down into my stomach. By the time that heat subsided, I had cooled down, too.

“Kikkawa. I know your name now.”

“Yahoo! I’m honored! Yippee!”

“...Now that I know it, we’re done here. Go away.”

“Wow. Why? What for?”

“I told you, I don’t intend to talk about anything but work. It’s a nuisance.”

“No chatting?”

“Yes.”

“No shooting the breeze?”

“Right.”

“No talking about love...?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Oof...”

Kikkawa got an odd look on his face, and slumped to the counter. Why would he not go away when I was so blatantly rejecting him?

It was a test of our wills now. I’d stay quiet forever. No matter what, I wouldn’t respond. I wasn’t going to move from this spot.

...But Kikkawa was stubborn, too. It was impressive how he didn’t make a sound. The customers had mostly left at this point. Sherry’s Tavern, which was open until morning every day, was about to close up shop.

Having run out of patience, I looked beside me, and Kikkawa was sleeping. He was dead to the world, with a smile on his face.

“...What is wrong with this guy?”

5. Not Horses

I had at least heard of the Leslie Camp.

There was a merchant caravan led by the undead Ainrand Leslie that traveled around Grimgar. When did Leslie’s caravan move? No one knew that. No one had seen Leslie’s caravan on the move. However, when it wasn’t moving, that was another matter. The caravan stopped in places occasionally, and when it did, it was known as the Leslie Camp.

Leslie had treasures from across the world and the ages, and it was said that if you could steal even the tiniest fraction of them, you would become incredibly wealthy. According to some rumors, the Leslie Camp was open to all. He did not reject any guest, regardless of race, and would trade something of value for even a simple pebble. He welcomed his guests lavishly, but that was all Leslie’s

trap. It was said that once they had finished feasting, the guests were put into a sleep from which they would not awaken. It was also said that the guests were all added to the caravan. That there were survivors of the Leslie Camp out there somewhere. That Garlan Vedoy, the margrave of Alterna, was one of them.

Still, the topic of hunting for the Leslie Camp came up between volunteer soldiers every once in a while. I had never heard of a successful attempt, but I often heard tales of failure in Sherry's Tavern. It wasn't strange that I would be invited along to fill in the party numbers.

A warrior with a chiseled face who went by the name Dune called out to me, and I ended up on a search for the Leslie Camp. There were twelve of us in total.

It was ridiculous. We'd never find the place, but that didn't matter to me. I was only along as a sub healer, in case of emergencies, and Dune had promised me daily pay in addition to my own share. If I was guaranteed a profit, I wasn't going to complain.

We wandered the Quickwind Plains for four days, and in that time we were attacked by a number of wild beasts. My position was always in the center of our formation. I was in the spot furthest from the enemies, and I moved away from there as little as possible. There were two mages who couldn't get involved in the melee, either, so I stayed by their side to protect them.

Other than that, I just watched.

As I did, I made a point of not getting invested whatsoever. I'd do my job, but having emotions would only get in the way of that. They could cloud my judgment, cause me to make a mistake.

Obviously, it wasn't easy to do. If someone got hurt, for instance, I couldn't help but worry. It wasn't just me; nobody wanted to see people in pain. But I had to make careful decisions. How bad was the injury? Did it need to be healed now? My supply of magical power was not infinite. It was expended with each spell, and I'd run dry eventually. I had to conserve. I had failed at that once before. It was an incredibly massive blunder. I couldn't use magic when I needed it. I never wanted that to happen again.

People often protested. "I'm hurting here, so heal me already," and the like. It

wasn't my problem. I ignored them, and if they got too persistent, I'd say this:

"You're still alive, right? You didn't die, so it's fine, right?"

When I said that, most of them turned up their noses. Occasionally they'd snap and say, "Don't get cocky." I'd been asked, "Do you think you're the arbiter of life and death?" before, too. I didn't think that at all, but it was a pain to deal with, so I kept my mouth shut. Besides, they might not have been wrong. I might actually have been acting conceited. I didn't trust myself. In a way, I had more trouble believing in me than anyone. That's why what I thought didn't matter.

I just did my job. I did it for the money. I did it to make a living.

Why did I need money? Why did I have to go on living?

I was bound to get muddled if I thought about it, so I didn't want to push myself to come up with an answer. But it was probably because I had let my comrades die. I had killed three people. I didn't even have the right to die on my own terms. I think that's what it was.

I had worked with Dune once before. Not many volunteer soldiers hired me a second time. On the other hand, there were a small number who hired me repeatedly, and I secretly thought of them as my regulars. It was possible that Dune might become one of them.

After five days searching for the Leslie Camp, everyone's morale was low, and in camp that night they started to talk about calling off the search. I was asked for an opinion, and responded that I didn't care. In the end, we went home. It took two or three days to get back to Alterna. I was being paid a daily rate. If it took an extra day, I had that much more income, so I didn't care.

That night, I was alone with Dune on night watch, and we were sitting around the fire.

"Sorry, Merry. For dragging you along on something so boring."

"It's no big deal."

"But this kind of trip's not so great for a woman, right?"

"I'm not the only woman here, am I?"

“Well, no... You’re as brusque as ever, huh?”

Dune awkwardly scratched his head for a bit, but then he suddenly laughed.

“Well, I like that part of you, though.”

“Stop joking.”

“It’s no joke. I’m serious.”

When I looked at him, Dune was gazing at me with a serious look on his face.

“I’ve had you on my mind all this time. Would you go out with me?”

“I would not,” I replied instantly. I wanted to look down, but I resisted the urge and continued to watch Dune. I didn’t trust myself. I didn’t trust men. I had no idea what he’d do, so I didn’t let my guard down.

“...Is that, uh, just for now? Or do I have no chance in the future, either?”

“None. Not ever. Zero. It’s nonexistent.”

“Oh, yeah?” Dune looked sulkily to the side. It seemed he would not be becoming a regular. These things happened. There was nothing I could do about it.

On the way back to Alterna, in the night, as I was sleeping away from the rest of the group, Dune tried to get on top of me. Was it revenge for rejecting him? Had he gotten desperate? I was a light sleeper. I was able to notice and chase him off, so it didn’t turn into anything major. These things happened. I couldn’t let it get to me.

When we returned to Alterna, Dune grumbled about paying me my wages for the eight days. I, naturally, insisted I be paid in full, as per our agreement.

“Buddy, I’m amazed you can talk to me so calmly after what happened.”

“You’re the one who did it, not me. Also, I am not your buddy.”

“Maybe think a little about how other people feel.”

“Were you thinking about how I felt when you tried to do that?”

“That was... Okay, I was in the wrong there.”

“Yes. You were in the wrong. Entirely. I don’t know if my rejecting you hurt

your pride, or whatever, but you're a petty man to be acting so cheap over it."

"Buddy—"

"Did you not hear me? I am not your buddy. You sicken me. What? Are you going to punch me? Why don't you go ahead? I'm sure it'd hurt if you went all out on me, but I can heal the wounds with light magic. I'm sure you'd feel quite pathetic after doing something so pointless. You'd deserve it."

"If you want your money, have it!"

Dune turned bright red, and he threw eight days' worth of pay on the ground.

"You're a miserable woman, selling yourself for money! That's what you are, Merry!"

Once he had run off, I picked up the coins one by one. I was mad. I was miserable, and pathetic. But money was money.

If I went to Sherry's Tavern, I might run into Dune. What did I care? I wasn't the one who ought to be ashamed. That was Dune. Even though I felt that way, when I saw he wasn't in the tavern, I was obviously relieved.

I'm not selling myself, and, I'm not failing to think about other people's feelings, and, No, maybe I am, and, I don't want to think about them—I was thinking about it while sipping distilled liquor when, suddenly, I found Kikkawa was sitting next to me. I ignored him, of course, but Kikkawa was not the sort to let the fact he was being ignored dissuade him.

"Hey, you know... Neighbor. Is it just my imagination, or are you looking kind of down? I hope it is. I want my neighbor to be feeling good. I want her to sparkle. I think sparkling would suit her, you know. Oh, hey, just so you know, this is just me, like, talking to myself here, okay?"

Yeah, yeah, you talk to yourself. —I was talking to myself, too. No. I wasn't even talking.

Couldn't I have dodged Dune a little more tactfully? It wasn't my fault. I'd done nothing wrong. But I could have said it differently. "Merry, you're always so extreme." That's what Mutsumi would say. But a half-hearted reply, one that left him with hope, wouldn't have been good, either. Was that what I thought?

Or did I deliberately try to hurt Dune? Was I the one taking things out on him?

“Neighboooooor. Cheer up. Hey. Neighboooooor. If you’ve got troubles, you can talk about it. I’ll listen to anything. We’ll treat it like you’re talking to yourself.”

I wouldn’t tell him. —I couldn’t. I was alone. Being alone was best.

6. Unpredictable

My memories of the time I let three people die, and the things that happened after that, could be a bit fuzzy, but when I drank, I was careful not to drink to the point of inebriation, so I always knew what I had done, at least.

I was also well aware that I was not highly regarded.

I had gained a few nicknames, though no one would say them to my face.

One was Ill-tempered Merry.

Another was Scary Merry.

According to other people, I was a frightening woman.

First, there were my curt responses. I didn’t say more than I had to. I acknowledged that myself. Though, I didn’t feel I was being especially cold. I didn’t try to intimidate people, or insult them, but I did speak when necessary, of course. For example, if someone was acting like an idiot, it would be dangerous not to stop them. Most people didn’t say everything that they thought, and I could understand why they wouldn’t be able to. They might be timid, or not want to hurt their relationship with someone, or, well, there were any number of reasons. But if I thought I should stop someone, I never hesitated to. I didn’t care what anyone thought of me. My safety came before that.

I was uncooperative. That was why I couldn’t find comrades. That was another common complaint, but let me just say, I didn’t need them lecturing me.

I had no intention of making comrades in the first place. I wished they wouldn’t assume that just because they wanted comrades desperately, because they felt insecure without them, because they couldn’t do anything without

them, that I was the same. I felt better not having comrades, and I acted accordingly. That was different from being unable to get them.

You do what you like with your comrades, and I'll do what I like by myself, so just leave me alone. That was about how I felt. It wasn't that I lacked the ability to be cooperative, I simply was not attempting to cooperate. Because there was no need to.

I was getting work, in fact. Not constant work, but I had no trouble keeping myself fed. Nobody had any right to give me guff about my choices, but the fact was, I got it all the time.

The life of a volunteer soldier was not always easy, but maybe a lot of them had too much free time.

But that wasn't all there was to it. I understood that.

The Free Union guys, and men like Dune. There were a number of men who had it out for me for no good reason. As if that wasn't bad enough, there were occasionally women who became hostile to me just for being in the same party as them. They didn't have a good reason, either.

Imagine a woman has a thing for her party's leader, but he doesn't return her feelings. I join their party as a temporary sub healer, or for some other reason. He's being a little nice, and looking out for me. She doesn't like that. I'm not acting any different from usual, but she says I was making passes at him, or something, and that was why he got the wrong idea. "Stay away from him," she tells me, "Playing hard to get is part of your routine, isn't it?"

That was something I had been told before. I could only respond that, for my part, I had no such intentions. But there were women out there who, even once you told them straight out, would still hold on to their assumptions.

Men and women like that went around spreading rumors about me, both true and false. I didn't go around denying them, and before I knew it I had a reputation as Nasty Merry and Scary Merry.

They could do what they liked, and call me whatever they wanted, really. If I became infamous enough, no one would have any expectations for me anymore. Only people who were in so much trouble that they didn't care what

kind of person I was came to me with work. They tried to use me. That was fine. It was actually easier for me that way.

The only times I felt awkward were when I would run into Hayashi, Shinohara-san, or the other members of Orion at Sherry's Tavern. I couldn't very well ignore my former comrades who had treated me well, so I at least gave them a nod. Sometimes they tried to talk to me.

Shinohara-san, in particular, never failed to come over and talk. Never about anything much. "How've you been?" or "How are you doing?" Just a few words. Shinohara-san's behavior was impeccable. He even cared about an ingrate like me. He was such a good guy it was almost creepy. He was the one person I couldn't treat poorly.

Then there was this guy.

Kikkawa.

"Ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne. Neighbor, neighbor, Merry-san? Ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne. Huh? What am I doing, you ask? You're not asking? Well, ask! Come on, ask. I mean, it's fine if you don't. I'm just gonna tell you anyway. So, listen. There's, like, this challenge to see how many times you can say 'ne' in a row. Ne ne. Whoa! I messed up! It's pretty hard, if you actually try it, you know? For reals. If you think I'm lying, give it a go. Will you give it a shot? Yeah, no, not likely. I mean, I'm the first and all! Just came up with it! Maybe I won't do it anymore, either. Oh, by the way, by the way, ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne ne, I just said that, and I'm already doing it again! That's just how I roll! Bam...! Smash! Oh, right, right, right. I actually had business to discuss with you, for once!"

It was rare for him to have actual business with me. When I was at the counter in Sherry's Tavern, waiting for work to come in, Kikkawa occasionally—no, frequently—approached me and started rambling nonsense. I ignored basically all of it. It wasn't like he had any business with me. Yeah. If he had no business with me, what exactly was he playing at? The men who approached me with ulterior motives were easier to understand, and to deal with. When it

came to this guy, he was like this with everyone, not just me. He went around babbling at just about anyone. To the best of my knowledge, there was no other volunteer soldier like him. Kikkawa defied comprehension.

“...What, you have business with me?” I responded despite myself.

“Yep, yep. About that.”

Kikkawa frowned, then rubbed the base of his nose with his index finger.

“So, listen. Hmm. Uh, hey? So, well, I guess this is about work, in a way? Not from me, though? I mean, I’m in the Tokkis and all, right? I’m with Tokimune and all his fabulous friends, so this isn’t from me, but I wanted to introduce you to some guys who aren’t exactly unrelated to me, if that makes sense? Basically, we all enlisted at the same time. So, like, how about partying with them? That’s the idea.”

“You want me to join a party with these people?”

“Well, yep, that’s it. Wahey!”

“As a sub healer?”

“Nah, that’s the thing, see? Stuff, like, happened, and they don’t have a healer. So, you’d be, like, the main healer, not a sub? Okay, not ‘like’ the main healer, you’d totally be the main healer.”

“If it’s a job, I’ll take it.”

“Oh, yeah? Wow! Nice! Okay, I’ll introduce you then! Erm, I’ll bring them along, okay? Like, here, and now. Is that gonna be okay?”

“Go ahead.”

“Well, just wait! I’m gonna go at light speed! Whoosh...!”

If they joined at the same time as Kikkawa, that made them my juniors. Well, not that it mattered. Work was work. No matter who it was with, I’d keep my emotions absolutely flat, and just do my own job. Not only did I have no great expectations, I had no expectations at all.

But the volunteer soldiers Kikkawa brought to me looked so obviously unreliable, I couldn’t help but think, *Isn’t this going to be dangerous?*

There were three men. Though, it might have been more fitting to call them boys. Not in terms of age, but behavior. If I was being kind, they seemed naive. If I wasn't, they were children.

"So, so, this is Haruhiro, and this is Ranta, and Moguzo! All right, you three, say hi now! Greetings are the basis of good communication, you know!"

At Kikkawa's urging, the sleepy-eyed volunteer soldier who looked like a thief said, "...Uh, hello," and bowed his head. "I'm... Haruhiro. A... thief. There's... not much else to say."

"I-I'm Ranta!"

The small, curly-haired man looked lightly equipped for a warrior. He had a cheeky look on his face.

"I'm a dread knight... Got it? Heh. O-Oh, and... Oh, yeah, I'm hunting for a girlfriend. Yeah. Heheh!"

"I-I'm Moguzo. I'm a warrior."

This man, who was built like a hairless bear, seemed harmless, despite his imposing physique. He came off as timid, and I had to question whether he would be of any use.

"...I-It's nice to meet you," he concluded.

"Welp!" Kikkawa shot me a wink that made imaginary sparkles go flying and, making a peace sign next to his face, he said, "I'm off! I'll leave the rest to you young'uns! So long, so long, so long, Merry, beeeeam...!" and he left. What kind of beam was that?

The three guys just fidgeted and groaned, closing their eyes with looks of agony on their face, but they didn't say anything to me. *What is this?* I thought. Didn't they have business with me? Did I have to be the one to move this conversation forward? If I didn't, it looked like this was never going to end.

"And?"

I turned to them, using the absolute minimum number of words, and finally Haruhiro opened his mouth.

"Um, well... I asked Kikkawa. No, he brought us here, so you know that

already, huh? Yeah, you would. So, erm... we're kind of short a priest. You could say we're looking for a priest who'd be willing to join the party. So, um..."

Can't you talk without pausing? I suppressed the urge to say that, and took a deep breath. I should have expected no less from Kikkawa. This was the first time he had brought me work, and look at it. He was an unpredictable man.

"Terms?"

Haruhiro said, "...Terms?" his eyes widening in surprise. They still looked sleepy, though.

"Er, the terms are... we go to Damuro, and—oh, terms... what do you mean?"

Ranta grumbled, "Moron," and elbowed Haruhiro in the ribs. "It's like how much you pay her per night. That sort of thing. You oughta know that much!"

I glared at him. Ranta went, "Eek..." and backed away.

"I-It was a joke... okay? No, not a joke, an example, though maybe not an appropriate one..."

"Yes. It was incredibly inappropriate."

"...Yeah, it was, huh? Sorry? I didn't mean anything by it... I'm just tense..."

"You? Tense?" Haruhiro ribbed him, and Ranta immediately shot back with a "Shove off!"

Moguzo was looking down at the floor, like his stomach hurt or something, and he was sweating.

I had to conclude that a daily rate was out of the question. These kids couldn't pay it. Which meant all I would get was my share. How much did I stand to make with these children? I couldn't hope for much. I had to assume it would be fairly low. If I didn't come out in the red after deducting my daily rent and food costs, I'd be doing well.

I wasn't picky. Still, this might have been the first offer I should have turned down.

But.

If I refused, what would these horribly unreliable children do? What would

happen to them? Did I care? They had nothing to do with me.

But.

“If I get my share, that’s enough. Do we start tomorrow? If you have a meetup spot, tell me.”

7. Before Dawn

8:00 in the morning, in front of Alterna’s north gate. I had never once arrived late to a meeting. I usually arrived before anyone else. It was the same that day, too.

“—And on that note, everyooooone! I want to introduce you all to our new frieeend! It’s the priest, Merry! Okay, give her a nice round of applause...!”

When curly-haired Ranta shouted that in desperation, sleepy-eyed Haruhiro and bear-like Moguzo clapped hesitantly. The other two’s mouths were hanging open. They were both girls. One was a quiet-looking mage. The other had a bow and arrows, so she was likely a hunter. —Girls. They really did feel like girls, not volunteer soldier material. No one in the party did.

You’re kidding me, right...? That was my honest impression. I thought that I had worked with my fair share of diverse volunteer soldiers. Some older, some younger. Some more experienced, some less. But I had never seen a bunch of kids like them.

They looked like they had just become volunteer soldier trainees. Normally, after a day or two in this life, people changed a little. —Normal. In a way, these kids may have been the normal ones. We were the ones who weren’t normal. We had adjusted. Whether we liked it or not. As far as I knew, everyone was like that. *These kids were normal, but they were weird.*

“Th-This is Merry-san...”

When Ranta indicated to me again, the mage girl finally said, “He...” with a hesitant bow. “...Hello.”

“Ni... Nice to meet you,” the hunter girl greeted me, too.

What was I supposed to say? The girls were wary of me. Of course they would

be. That was to be expected. But there were no barbs. The wariness I was used to was more combative, closer to outright hostility. That, or irritation and disgust. Displeasure. With these girls, their wariness came with such a large amount of bewilderment that I couldn't help but feel confused, too.

I had no idea what to do. I brushed my hair back behind my ear, and looked to Haruhiro.

"Is this everyone?"

"Yeah..."

I looked him in the eye, and Haruhiro hurriedly looked down. That reaction. It was too normal...

"Uh, yeah. This is everyone. With you included, there's six of us."

"I see," I said with a little laughing snort. I couldn't keep this up if I didn't laugh. I needed to change gears. This was hard. Too hard.

"Well, that's fine. As long as I get my share, I don't care. Where are we heading? Damuro?"

"Y-Yeah... I guess?"

"You guess? Be clear."

"D-Damuro. The Old City. Hunting goblins... As for the rest, I don't know."

"Fine, whatever. Well, how about you get going? I'll follow you."

"...Hey, you know?" Ranta looked at me with upturned eyes. "C-Couldn't you, uh, do something about the way you talk, your attitude...?"

"Huh?"

"...No, s-sorry... Really, sorry. It's nothing..."

This man wasn't even worth mentioning. If I could shut him up this easily, he was easy.

There was absolutely no conversation during the one-hour walk to Damuro. Even if they had tried to talk to me, I doubt I would have responded. What did these kids talk about normally? I couldn't imagine. I only knew that they didn't mesh with me. Though, no one did anymore.

I've come a long way, huh? I suddenly thought, I must have started in a place similar to Haruhiro and his group. It wasn't an easy enough time that I can say, "It was fun back then." But, you know, maybe it was fun. It was fulfilling. When I look at these kids, I feel like I can remember it. I don't want to remember. I should have rejected this job. I screwed up.

"...What if we run into them again?"

Just before we entered the Old City, Haruhiro mumbled that.

"If we do," Ranta said in a strangely dark tone, "We've got to kill them. I won't be satisfied until I've cut that armored bastard and the hobgob's ears off and offered them on Lord Skullhell's altar."

"But..." The mage girl's tone was less dark, and more cold. It didn't suit her. "We can't win. Not as we are now."

Ranta scoffed. "We'll fight even if we can't win."

"If we get ourselves killed doin' that—" the hunter girl's voice quivered, "...If we die like that, it'll all be for nothin'."

"Dying is no good." Moguzo nodded vigorously. "I don't want anyone else to die."

It was bizarre for a party not to have a healer. For this party to have never had a healer to begin with. That was impossible.

"Is someone..."

I started to say, then bit my lip. There was no need to ask.

It wasn't that they never had a healer. They lost one.

They probably died.

"...going to go out? Or not? I don't care which, but make it quick."

Ranta looked away, clicking his tongue in disapproval.

"Let's get on with it, Haruhiro."

"Yeah..."

Haruhiro's eyes had wandered, as if he was hesitating. Come to think of it,

who was the leader in this party? I had a feeling it was Haruhiro, but I couldn't be sure. A party with no leader. That's what they looked like. Could it be...

Was the healer who died their leader...?

If so—if that was what happened, that was about the worst possible outcome. No, it was the worst.

This job scares me. It's too scary.

Even as I thought that, I would do my job without letting it show. That was my policy, but it was really hard this time. The way Haruhiro stuttered when he said, “L-Let's go,” honestly left me feeling pretty gloomy. How exactly did these kids hunt? I didn't want to think about it. I just hoped they understood the most basic theory. I wasn't asking for much, but my hopes were still shattered.

Though, not immediately. We all stalked the area, and Haruhiro at least seemed like a thief when he went out and scouted, but we didn't find any suitable prey. Well, of course not. It seemed these kids had narrowed their aim to just groups of two goblins or less. But goblins weren't stupid. They knew it was obviously safer to move in groups. There weren't going to be that many goblins alone, or with just one other. In my experience, goblins in the Old City of Damuro generally traveled in groups of three or more. How could the party take down a group of three goblins? That was the first hurdle to hunting in the Old City, and everything started there, in a way.

Basically, these kids weren't even standing at the starting line yet.

Still, if this kept up, we'd never be able to hunt, and that meant no income. Haruhiro seemed to have resolved himself. The target Haruhiro found for us just after noon was a group of three goblins.

In the ruins of a broken building, there was a goblin in chainmail with a short spear, and two goblins wearing clothing made of actual cloth, one of them carrying an ax, the other carrying a short sword. Haruhiro started to explain something resembling a strategy.

“First, Yume and Shihoru launch a preemptive strike on the spear gob. Me, Ranta, Yume and Merry will keep the ax gob and short sword gob busy, so Moguzo and Shihoru take out the spear gob. If it's hard for the two of you,

either Ranta or I will step in to help. Once the spear gob is taken out, this will be easy.”

“Hold on.”

It wasn't like I hadn't anticipated this. I'd suspected these kids didn't know even the basic theory. They didn't. That was all. But it was a shock. Did they not understand? This was why they lost their comrade.

“Why am I fighting goblins?”

“Huh... W-Was that not okay? Huh? Why not...?”

“I don't go up front. I'm a priest, the reason should be obvious.”

“Hey...” Ranta started to snap, but composed himself, “...pal.”

“Pal?”

I was irritated. Not angry. There was no need to get angry. This was work.

For me, this is just a job. But what about you people? Are you okay with this?

Ranta hesitated, “...Y-You?” he corrected himself. He was the one who had gotten intimidated, but it seemed he didn't like it. “No, it's weird for me to address you like that... M-Merry!”

“Where's my -san?”

“M-Merry...-san,” a vein was pulsing on Ranta's temple, and his whole body was shaking.

What's he so indignant about? Is he an idiot?

“N-Now listen, you priests carry that thing with you. That, uh, what's it called? A priest's staff? You've got one, right? That thing's for whacking stuff with, right? Or is it just for show?”

“Yes. This is just for show.”

“Why you little...”

“Little?”

“M-Merry...-san, you, couldn't you be a little more, you know, more... uh, I don't know. Forget it. Just do whatever you want...”

“I’d do what I want without you telling me to, you realize?”

“Of course you would! Hahahaha! I figured as much! Dammit, what’s this bitch’s problem...?”

“Could you refrain from using such filthy words? They soil my ears.”

“I’m so sorry! My bad! If you really don’t like it, why not try some earplugs?”

“Why should I have to trouble myself like that?”

“A-Anyway...” Haruhiro said, scratching his neck as he stepped in to stop us fighting, “I understand what you’re saying. Merry will stand by in the rear until she’s needed. Um, maybe near Shihoru would be best. Shihoru’s a mage, so she doesn’t go up front. That should be fine... right?”

To stand by until I was needed. That was exactly the role of a priest. It looked like he finally got it. The mage girl. Shihoru, was it? I hadn’t even heard her name before. What was with these kids? They made me mad. If I got too irritated, it could affect my work.

“Sounds reasonable, I guess?”

“W-Well, we’ll go with that, then... Yume, Shihoru, please.”

When Haruhiro called their names, the mage girl and the hunter girl both silently nodded. The hunter girl’s name was apparently Yume.

Yume and Shihoru were blatantly angry. They must have really disliked me, because they wouldn’t even look me in the eye. Well, not that I cared.

The three boys may not have bothered to sufficiently explain to them why I was here. There were signs to suggest that was what had happened. If that was it, then it was hard to blame the two of them for being wary of me. I mean, normally you’d say something, right? I mean, wasn’t it obvious that the whole group should have talked it over first? Were they not communicating? They were beyond inexperienced; they were worse than amateurs, and they didn’t seem to get along that well, either. Seriously, what was going on here?

Haruhiro went ahead of the group with Yume and Shihoru following behind him. Then, when he approached the area in question, Shihoru prepared a spell on his signal, and Yume readied her bow. Shadow Beat, huh? Shihoru’s spell hit

the spear goblin. That made the goblin drop its spear, but Yume's arrow missed. It was a ranged weapon; she was bound to miss sometimes. But not like that.

"...That was just awful," I muttered, and Yume jumped a bit as she gripped her bow tighter.

You focus too much when you're loosing your arrow. It's not my specialty, and I'm not your comrade, so I won't tell you that, though. But I hope you realize it. Even if it's hard to see your own faults.

"Don't worry about it!" Haruhiro called out to Yume as he drew his dagger.

You have the presence of mind to reassure Yume, huh? That's impressive, but it's really not what you should be focusing on right now.

Moguzo and Ranta attacked the goblins. The ax gob and the short sword gob got in their way, and in that time the spear gob was scrambling to pick up its spear. Haruhiro performed a Backstab on the short sword gob. It was only a scratch. But the short sword gob became focused on him. Ranta was handling the ax gob. Moguzo went for the spear gob. Ahh, but the spear gob was faster. It got its short spear and stabbed at Moguzo. Moguzo did a good job of tucking his arms in and using his bastard sword to deflect the spear. He was pretty skillful for such a big guy. Yume pulled out a machete and charged. It looked like she was going to support Haruhiro. That was unusually daring for a female hunter. Diagonal Cross. The short sword gob jumped back and evaded it, but it was still a pretty good attack. Was Yume better at close combat?

"Ohm, rel, ect, vel, darsh...!"

Shihoru used Shadow Beat again. It looked like she was trying to support Moguzo, but the spear gob got out of the way. The shadow elemental that Shadow Beat launched was slow. It was hard to get it to hit without some preparation. But Shihoru's aim was good. The spear gob was thrown a little off balance, so Moguzo immediately swung his bastard sword. It was too far, though. He caught nothing but air. He didn't understand his striking distance. Had he never fought an enemy with a spear before?

Ranta was struggling against the ax gob. It wasn't going well, but couldn't he do something about the way he moved? There was too much waste. Was that just how dread knights were? I couldn't believe that. The dread knights moved

around a lot, but it was usually sharper. He looked like a frog flailing around in confusion.

Haruhiro and Yume had a 2-1 advantage. They'd be fine.

Moguzo was on the receiving end of a flurry of thrusts from the spear gob, and it had him recoiling. With his enemy using a spear, that was only going to make his situation worse, though. He just didn't have enough experience. He didn't know how to fight. If I were his comrade... No, even if I were his comrade, I wouldn't be in a position to tell him to do this, or do that.

"Ow...!"

Ranta took a cut to his left thigh, and jumped back like a frog. Goblins were shorter than humans. He needed to be especially careful of attacks to his lower half, but he didn't seem to know that.

"Yume, I'll take care of this one, you take the ax gob!"

Haruhiro planned to have Yume help Ranta? He was watching, and the decision wasn't too slow. But was it a good one? Did Ranta need support now?

"Merry, heal Ranta!"

"No," I responded immediately.

"No?! Huh? Why not?!" Ranta protested.

"It's not a wound that requires immediate treatment. Suck it up."

"...Why you...!" Ranta took out his anger on the ax gob.

See? He was fine.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit! Don't get all conceited just because you're a little, okay, very, attractive! This is bullshit! Bullshiiiiit...!"

"Aren't you supposed to be in pain, Ranta?"

"I am in pain! Hatred...!"

Ranta swung his longsword downward diagonally at the ax gob. Well, with an attack that telegraphed, there was no way he was going to hit. It easily dodged.

"I'm gushing blood here, you know?! Of course it hurts! It hurts,

goddammit...!”

The short sword gob swept Yume’s legs from under her, and she landed on her rump with a cry of surprise. For a moment, I almost sprang into action, but Haruhiro was there. There was no telling if the enemy had reinforcements coming, and I had to protect Shihoru. Besides, the goblins looked ready to flee.

“Why you...!” Haruhiro tried to put himself between the short sword gob and Yume. The short sword gob ran. It was fleeing. Along with the other gobs.

Haruhiro looked dumbfounded. Ranta was frustrated. Moguzo, Yume, and Shihoru seemed relieved.

“You’re all worn out.” I gave them my honest opinion. Maybe I shouldn’t have. But I couldn’t hold back. Haruhiro glared at me, but he didn’t retort. If he had said so much as a word in response, I’m sure I wouldn’t have been able to restrain myself any longer.

Good for all of you. You didn’t die. You got lucky this time. But if you keep on repeating this, you’ll pay for it eventually.

Not that it’s my problem. It has nothing to do with me. Because I’m not your comrade. You people probably don’t think of me as one, and neither do I.

I have one suggestion. Why don’t you quit? I don’t think you people can be volunteer soldiers. You’re not cut out for it. Though, it won’t be easy to find another lifestyle, either.

Alterna was a base for the Kingdom of Arabakia’s return to the frontier. It was just a fortress city. The Frontier Army was garrisoned there, and the volunteer soldiers supported them. The Frontier Army was a professional military, so it wasn’t easy to get in, and there were already enough people to do all of the other jobs. It cost more than just money to join the blacksmiths’, or the artificers’, or the merchants’ guilds, and they’d still make you do hard labor for a pittance of a wage. If you were a woman, you could work in the taverns, or other businesses of that sort, but even then it probably wasn’t an easy life. Basically, we had no choice but to be volunteer soldiers. You almost had to suspect there was some conspiracy to make it so things were that way.

We finished work for the day. I call it work, but our income was zero. I was in

the red. That night, I didn't go to Sherry's Tavern, instead staying in my room.

Fortunately, the inn I was renting a room at had a proper bath. I could take a long, leisurely soak alone late at night, so I more or less always chose that time to do it. I had always been a night owl. I almost never went to bed early.

The bathwater was lukewarm. I needed to add more hot water to adjust the temperature. It was a pain, but I was used to it. If I could wash my body and hair, and then soak in a bath at just the right temperature, I could reset my feelings.

I was a volunteer soldier, so it wasn't like I couldn't handle going without a bath. But honestly, without this ritual I undertook at the inn, I'd have long since lost any kind of mental balance.

However, my ritual had one shortcoming. In the bath, I tried to empty my head, but it was difficult to achieve a state of nothingness. I sometimes thought about things I didn't need to.

Will I go hunting with those children again tomorrow? The question weighed on me. My stomach hurt. *Maybe I shouldn't*, I thought. I had never abandoned a job after accepting it before. But was there any need to insist on keeping it that way? *Maybe it's fine? I'll quit.* I was hesitant to do it without saying anything, though. I'd have to tell them myself. *I can't work with you people. I don't want to die because you took me down with you.*

You people want to die, right? That's why you're such a haphazard mess, right? If you want to die, then die. Don't get me caught up in it. —No.

That couldn't be right. If they wanted to die, they wouldn't have brought in a priest like me. Those kids were doing their best, in their own way. They just weren't good at it. They were probably suffering because, no matter what they did, it didn't go well. That had to be frustrating, and painful. It was the same for us. Things were going smoothly, but we got tripped up, and we failed sometimes. We overcame that, and moved on. Because we were able to overcome things, we got cocky, and we made a fatal mistake.

Everyone makes mistakes. It can be a thin margin that decides if those mistakes are irreversible or not. We all learn from our mistakes. In order to avoid repeating them. You might even say that as long as we don't die, we've

gained the right to make our next mistake.

As long as those kids didn't die, tomorrow would be better than today for them. They'd be able to handle the situation a little more. If they could just live through today and tomorrow.

I mumbled, "Let's do some work," and let my lips sink into the water. I wasn't their comrade. But I could work. I would do my job as a priest. So that those kids could live to see tomorrow. Until those kids got tired of dealing with me, who could only work. Until then, I would do my job. That was all I had. There was nothing else left for me now.

ex.6

The Fun has

Just Begun

**Grimgar of
Fantasy and Ash**

Level. Fourteen Plus Plus

UJGOLPE

1. Act Normal

“Okay.” In the volunteer soldier lodging house courtyard, Haruhiro took another look at the coins, which were not so much lined up on their table as scattered across it. “Whew...” He let out a sigh.

There were copper coins. One copper coin was one copper.

There were silver coins, too. One silver coin was 100 copper.

And there were those ones.

Gold coins.

Naturally, they were made of gold. One gold coin was 10,000 copper.

100 copper coins, 99 silver coins, and finally 29 gold coins. All told, it was 30 gold.

“I’ve thought about it, and heard everyone out, but, yeah... we’re going to split it all evenly.”

“Well, duh!”

Ranta reached out, and snatched five gold coins.

“Gwehehehehehe! With 5 gold, the world’s my oyster! Here it is; at last, my time has come...!”

“We all know you’ll waste it on something stupid...”

“Huh?! Did you say something, Shihoru?!”

“...Not really, no.”

“No, you did! I heard you loud and clear! I did! Something about me wasting it on stupid stuff! I dunno about that! I don’t think it’s good to go jumping to conclusions!”

“Well, what will you spend it on, then?”

When Merry asked that in a cutting tone, Ranta cleared his throat and puffed up his chest with a big “Ahem.” There was a sparkle in his eye.

“I’m glad you asked! I’m gonna invest it in myself! Do some self-innovation!”

“Ohh...” Moguzo’s eyes widened. Yume cocked her head to the side.

“Self-immolation...?”

“No, that’s different! You dummy!”

“Yume doesn’t want you callin’ her a dummy!”

“What’s wrong with calling a dummy a dummy, you moron?!”

“Dummies who go around callin’ other people dummies are the real dummies, you dummy!”

“You just called me a dummy, so I guess that makes you a dummy, you dummy!”

“Murrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrgh...!”

“Hmph!”

Ranta and Yume both looked away in a huff at the same time.

“S-So,” Moguzo interrupted, probably trying to smooth things over, “What are you going to invest in? Skills...?”

“Y-Yeah.” Ranta crossed his arms, and made a vague expression that neither confirmed nor denied anything. “W-Well, yeah. It’s like that, but, you know. It’s an investment, okay? How do I put this? I’m using the money on something that’ll help me in the future. To grow up, you know, to make a man of me... Yeah...”

Shihoru gave Ranta a look of utter contempt. That clued Haruhiro in. Oh... To grow up. To become an adult—To make a man of him. So that’s what it was.

“On *that*...”

When Haruhiro muttered to himself, the left side of Ranta’s face twitched.

“Wh-What do you mean, that? On what?”

“...Who knows.”

“Say it! Just come out and say it! You’re making this awkward!”

“What will you use the money on, Shihoru?”

“...I-I’ll...”

“Come on, people! Don’t just ignore me!”

“You’re always makin’ too much noise, Ranta.”

“Shut up! You’ve always got tiny tits!”

“Don’t call them tiny!”

“U-Um!”

If Moguzo hadn’t interrupted them, Ranta and Yume might have gone on like that forever.

“Erm, I think I’ll take Death Spots’ sword to the blacksmith, and get it fixed up so I can use it. S-So... would someone come with me, if you don’t mind?”

“Sure...” Haruhiro put his hand up. “I’ll go.”

“In that case, I’ll go, too.”

He hadn’t expected this. Merry volunteered, too. And, wait...

In that case?

His eyes met Merry’s. That meant Haruhiro had looked at Merry, and at the same time, she, too, had been looking at him.

They unintentionally ended up looking into one another’s eyes.

It was kind of awkward, or embarrassing, and he wanted to look away immediately, but that felt embarrassing in its own way.

What should I do?

He had to agonize over it. He was at a loss. But it was weird to stay like this for too long, too. This situation was clearly not normal. He needed to hurry. To do something.

“W-Well.”

Haruhiro tried to smile.

No, is smiling the right move? It makes it seem like I’m happy. Isn’t that awkward? It could be misunderstood, or, no, it’s not like I’m not happy, but I’m not sure if it’s alright to be so obviously happy, though acting all stoic feels off,

too. Can't I just be normal? Uh, but... what is normal...?

Haruhiro didn't really know, but he still desperately tried to feign normalcy as he said, "Let's go together..."

"Yes."

Merry was probably acting normal. No, there might have been a bit of a, *What's wrong?* in her expression.

Honestly, I wonder about that...



2. Trigon of Dreams

“Haruhiro-kun. Merry-san. Both of you, thank you.”

As he walked through the craftsmen’s town carrying the sword of the infamous Death Spots, Moguzo was the picture of happiness. It was rare to see him look so pleased.

“Oh, no, it’s no big deal...” Haruhiro gave a vague response, then laughed.

“Don’t worry about it.”

What was Merry thinking when she gave that simple but curt response? How did she feel? There was nothing to it. Merry was normal. Though, normal was very different from how Merry had been before, and she was beginning to get used to the party. But even so, there was some distance there, you could say. To give an example, you could feel an extra degree of distance between her and her female comrades, Yume and Shihoru. But slowly, gradually, she was trying to narrow it. That was probably why she had come along today. That was all. She didn’t mean anything special by it.

“...Yeah. That’s gotta be it. That’s it.”

“Haru? Did you say something?”

“Huh? M-Me? D-Did I...?”

“I’m the one who asked.”

“Y-You were, weren’t you?! That’s right. Yeah. Um, not really... I-I was just talking to myself, you could say. There was no real meaning to it. Sometimes, I just mumble...”

“Ohhh.” Merry gave the barest hint of a smile, then took a breath. “I guess that’s a thing we do sometimes. I do it, too.”

“It is, right?! Yeah. It’s a thing we do. Why, though? I wonder...”

“I—” Merry started to say something, then, “No, never mind.” She shook her head.

“Huh? Wh-What? Just say it.”

“It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“I’m by myself a lot of the time. So I thought that might be why.”

Urgh... Haruhiro felt something tighten in his chest.

Honestly, it made him want to shout.

Merryyyyyyyy...! Hold oooooon! Merryyyyyy...?!

Don’t say that...!

Yes, the one who told her to “Just say it,” and made her tell him something sad like she talked to herself because she was always alone was Haruhiro himself, but still!

I didn’t want to make you say that... you know.

Well—as the party’s leader? Maybe...? Yeah. Strictly as the party leader. In my role as leader, I should worry about that sort of stuff, watch it, I guess? It may be her personal, private issue, but, like, we’re comrades and all? Yeah, comrades! Even if I weren’t the leader, it’s normal to worry about her as a fellow human being, right? Right?

“Ahh, erm... I-In times like that...”

“Times like that?” Merry asked, blinking. Like she was giving him a blank look. That expression. What did it mean? Merry was kinda, you know? She could be pretty cold. She had acted sort of prickly when they first met, yeah? There had been none of that lately, but she wasn’t exactly the emotionally expressive type. From what Hayashi had told him, she had been really cheerful, once upon a time, but the thing that happened must still have been casting a shadow over her. The pain of loss must’ve changed Merry. She was forced to change. There was no need to force her to go back to her old self. But someday, he wanted her to be able to smile from the bottom of her heart.

That, basically, was why that blank look—it caught him by surprise. He felt like it was the first time he’d seen it.

It seemed innocent, untainted, pure... What should he call it?

In a word, cute?

Cute, huh?

That didn't seem right, but not all that far off. No, maybe it was too right? Dead on? He'd hit it out of the park?

"...T-Times like that... Uh, yeah, times like that... Like that? Huh...?"

What was it again?

What kind of times were those times? What had he even been talking about? He didn't know. He couldn't recall. What now? Should he ask? Merry? When he was the one who started talking, that seemed weird. Then what, think about it? He was. He was trying to recall. He just couldn't.

"I-It happens, right? There are times like that!"

He'd have to push through this. Haruhiro made a strong declaration.

Merry furrowed her brow a bit, seeming a little dubious, but in the end, "Sure," she agreed with him. That had to be out of kindness. She was being considerate. Merry had shown him kindness.

I'm the one, though! The one who needs to be kind! As the leader! As her comrade! I know Merry's having all kinds of trouble. What am I doing, making her be kind to me instead? I fail as a leader. No, it's no exaggeration to say I fail as a human being. Okay, maybe that's too far. I'm being hyperbolic. Whatever, I got out of it, so it's all good.

"Oh! Over there."

Moguzo suddenly came to a stop, pointing to a narrow road on their left. When Haruhiro looked, there was a T-junction at the end of the short road, and a bare stone building there. There was a sign out front.

Workshop Masukaze, it read.

"It's kind of out of the way, huh?"

"Y-Yeah." Moguzo sounded somewhat tense. His face was a little stiff. "I hear it's run by a talented smith. He's an odd one, though. I mean, I heard he only accepts unusual jobs, or something like that..."

Haruhiro looked at Death Spots' sword, which Moguzo was carrying on his shoulder.

"Oh, yeah? Well, what you've got there may count, huh?"

"Maybe. That's what I thought, too."

"Why don't we just go see?"

At Merry's urging, the three of them walked down the narrow road. The door to Workshop Masukaze was made of steel. There were patterns carved into the whole surface of it, and they were inlaid with a blackish metal. This was delicate work. Even an amateur could tell. On closer inspection, Workshop Masukaze's sign was made of iron, too, and was similarly inlaid.

When they opened the door and looked inside, "Wah!" Moguzo's head shot back. And it wasn't just him. Haruhiro and Merry had the same reaction.

There were weapons lining the walls and stands. That was fine. The issue wasn't the weapons, it was the thing occupying the center of the room, glaring at them—a metal... horse? Was that what it was? No. That was no horse.

If it were a horse, there would be two front legs, and two back legs. But that thing had wheels in place of legs. Two in front, one in back. Three in total.

If you were to call it something, it would be a wheeled horse...?

The expression on it, or the shape of the head attached to the neck, was somewhat horse-like, but different. "Then what was it?" you might ask, but Haruhiro had no answer. Maybe the dragons he had heard rumors of had faces like this. Then this was a wheeled dragon-horse?

"Oh! Welcome!"

A man came out from the back. It seemed that was where the smithy was.

The man had long hair, and wore a craftsman's apron. He wasn't that large, but he was sturdy, and looked light. It was hard to guess his age. He had to be a lot older than Haruhiro, but this man felt like he had probably been this way ten years ago, and would be unchanged ten years from now. That was the aloof impression he gave.

From the way he smiled, raising one hand and approaching with light steps,

Riyosuke glanced at Moguzo.

“Can I have this?”

“Wha—” Moguzo was speechless. Well, of course he was. Why would he bring it all this way here just to give the thing away?

“No!” Haruhiro interjected, “Y-You can’t have it! You can’t, okay? That’s crazy! Um, but that’s not the issue, we want you to fix it so it can be used.”

“I’m joking,” Riyosuke said with a smile, then, looking down, he clicked his tongue.

“...You just clicked your tongue.”

When Merry gently pointed that out, Riyosuke smiled again.

“That was a joke, too.”

“Was it really...?”

Haruhiro said what he was thinking despite himself.

“Why, of course it was, geez,” Riyosuke said, looking to the wheeled dragon-horse as he did for some reason. “By the way, what do you think of this work? It’s quite something, isn’t it?”

Moguzo seemed overwhelmed as he said, “Oh, yes,” with a nod. “I-It’s cool... yeah. D-Did you make that, too, Riyosuke-san?”

“Yes. That’s right. I made it. It’s cool? I see. Thank you. I’m honored.”

“What is that?”

When Merry asked him, “Let me turn that around,” Riyosuke said. “What do you think it is?”

“...A horse?”

“Yes. One of the motifs is indeed a horse.”

“The head is... a dragon, maybe?” Haruhiro suggested.

“It is,” Riyosuke said with a nod, “My image for the head was, in fact, a dragon. I ran into one back when I was a volunteer soldier. Just one, though.”

“Oh, you were a volunteer soldier, huh?”

“I’ve changed my line of work. Quite a long time ago, too.”

“A horse and a dragon...” Haruhiro looked at the wheels. “Why are the legs wheels?”

“Ah, these.” The expression suddenly vanished from Riyosuke’s face. “I saw them in a dream. I think they must be from some vehicle. This “Trigon” was made with a horse, a dragon, and that vehicle as its motifs.”

“Trigon...”

Moguzo looked at the Trigon with a serious expression, then sighed.

For Haruhiro’s part, he couldn’t help but think, *And?*

What is this thing? It doesn’t look like a weapon. Is it a vehicle? Maybe you could ride on the horse’s back, but it’s too heavy to be drawn like a carriage. Is it just a stationary art piece?

“Well, it’s a dreamlike thing that came out of my dream,” Riyosuke said with a personable smile, “I’m sorry to talk about such an odd thing. Thank you for playing along. Oh, but it was fun talking. Now, I still have work to do, so let’s leave it at that.”

“Oh, thank you...” Moguzo bowed his head, but—*No, no, no.*

“H-Hold on!” Haruhiro called after Riyosuke.

“The sword! Why are you subtly trying to run off with Death Spots’ sword?!”

“You caught me, huh?” Riyosuke, who had been trying to walk into the back with the sword still in his arms, turned around. He was smiling, of course. “It’s a joke.”

“You were absolutely serious...”

“Only enough to think, ‘Maybe I’ll get lucky.’ Ha ha ha.”

“Is this okay?” Merry frowned, lowering her voice—though, not so low Riyosuke wouldn’t be able to hear her—and asking Moguzo and Haruhiro, “Are you sure we want to ask someone like this?”

“Um, er...” Moguzo mumbled, clearly uneasy. Haruhiro didn’t know whether to trust the blacksmith either.

“Leave it to me, I insist.”

That the only one who seemed confident about it was Riyosuke himself made it all the more suspicious.

“I believe I can guarantee you’ll be satisfied. Ah, yes. Let me take some measurements now, and I’ll do up an estimate for you. If you’re satisfied with the price, I don’t mind being paid once the work is done, so I’ll ask you to leave it with me for four days. That’ll work. You’ve come to the right place.”

3. The Boston Crab

The blacksmith Riyosuke at Workshop Masukaze had been pushy, and his price of 40 silver to repair the massive sword was not that expensive, so Moguzo let him do it. Or rather, he couldn’t refuse. “He got pushed into it” might have been the more accurate way to put it.

In the time it took for Moguzo’s weapon to be ready, everyone decided to take the opportunity to learn new skills.

Moguzo picked the heavy-armor fighting technique Steel Guard. It made use of his armor to knock back enemy attacks. Learning to use his armor even though he had a new weapon on the way was a very Moguzo thing to do.

Ranta chose Dread Aura. It was some sort of dread magic that powered up a dread knight with the power of Skullhell, or something like that. His last skill, Dread Teller, had been a flop, or at least Ranta hadn’t been able to get any practical use out of it in battle. But from what he’d said, Dread Aura was a simple enhancement spell, so it seemed like it should be fine.

Yume apparently intended to learn Weasel Somersault. It was classified as a machete technique, but the skill involved a quick somersault to avoid enemy attacks, or gain some distance from them. While Yume was a hunter, she actually fought in close quarters more than she used a bow. It would definitely be of use.

Shihoru was picking up the distraction spell, Shadow Complex. It was Darsh magic that confused the target. It wasn’t meant to deal damage, but to interfere.

Merry had said she meant to learn Protection. Its effect was to boost the performance of up to six people at once using the blessings of Lumiaris. Why six? The symbol of Lumiaris was a hexagram, and the number was viewed as holy, so that might have something to do with it. There were even some theories that this spell was the reason volunteer soldier parties only went up to six members. It was sure to make the party stronger. *I want to empower my comrades.* That might be what Merry was thinking.

Now, as for Haruhiro...

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow...?!”

“You’re sloppy, Old Cat.”

“No, but it hurts!”

“Well, obviously. Of course it’s going to hurt. I’m applying severe torque to your wrist and elbow.”

“Augh, that hurts! Wai—Barbara-sensei! Y-You’re breaking it...!”

“No, I’m not. No, I’m not. To break it, I’d have to do—this!”

“Gwaoh...!”

Did it make a sound? Just now? Pop. It did, right? His right elbow bone.

“Aghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?! Owwwwwww...?!”

“Just kidding. I lied. I didn’t break it, okay? Just dislocated it. Pop it back in, and you’ll be all better. Like this.”

“Gah...!”

“See?”

Keeping a firm lock on Haruhiro’s right wrist and elbow, she brought her face so close their cheeks were almost touching.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore, right?”

“...I-It hurts, okay...? Pretty badly, too...”

“You’re so gutless. I’m gonna break it for real this time. There!”

“Agyagh?! ”

This time, it broke for real. —Or so he thought, but she let him go, for some reason.

Barbara-sensei was a short distance away, chuckling.

When he relaxed, she closed in quickly. Haruhiro tried to dodge. Seriously, too. Desperately even. It didn't work at all. In no time flat, Barbara-sensei had Haruhiro by the right arm, and had his wrist and elbow in a lock, bent to their furthest extremity.

"This is Arrest. How many times will I have to show you before you learn, hmm, Old Cat? You're not old enough to be going senile yet."

"...D-Do it a little slower..."

"Slower? What's that? Do you want me to snuff the life out of you? Slowly?"

"N-No, that's not it. I want you to demonstrate it more slowly..."

"Oh. I see. There's some sense to that, huh?"

Barbara-sensei quickly let go of him.

"Huh...?"

This was suspicious. Too suspicious. Knowing Barbara-sensei, she might pull another trick on him. Of course she would.

As he watched tensely, Barbara-sensei gently seized Haruhiro's right arm.

"First, like this."

"Uh... Right."

"Then, like this—"

No, it wasn't so much that she was seizing his right arm.

Barbara-sensei drew close to Haruhiro, and because of her light dress—with not much material actually covering her skin—her bare flesh was pressed against his.

This is...

"Hm?"

Barbara-sensei cocked her head to the side.

“What’s wrong, Old Cat? Is there some part you don’t understand?”

“...No. Th-There’s not really anything I don’t understand...”

“Hmm? Then you’re perfect, huh?”

Barbara-sensei pushed Haruhiro away, then put her right arm out without real concern.

“In that case, you try it.”

“I-I’m going to try it?”

“That’s right. This training is so you can learn to do it, isn’t it?”

“...Point taken.”

Haruhiro looked down and gulped. In this situation, if he said, “I can’t,” there was no telling what she might do to him. Knowing Barbara-sensei, he wouldn’t get off lightly. He’d be left wandering on the edge of death, and that was no joke.

Naturally, if he tried and failed, he’d be punished.

If he didn’t try, he’d be half-killed.

Hell in front of him. Hell behind, too.

A tiger at the front gate, wolves at the back.

Huh? Wasn’t he screwed either way...?

No, no, if he thought about which was worse, the answer was obvious.

“I-I’ll do it.”

When Haruhiro declared his pathetic decision, Barbara-sensei smiled and swayed her arm back and forth.

She’s pretty sexy, huh? Haruhiro thought despite himself. He suppressed a smile, and kept up a serious expression. Though, Barbara-sensei probably saw right through him. Barbara-sensei closely watched for any momentary thoughts, any wavering of the emotions.

“All right, come get me.”

Her beckoning gesture and her tone of voice were both more suggestive than

necessary. Even more so than usual. It was like she was inviting him to do something else entirely. What was that something else? Well, setting that aside for now, this was part of his training, too.

A level head. Keep a level head.

He had to resist Barbara-sensei's attempts to shake him up. Train his spirit, and keep his cool. If he didn't, he couldn't use the skill he was learning in an actual battle.

"...Here I come."

Haruhiro grabbed Barbara-sensei's right arm with both hands.

It feels kinda...

It was quite muscular, or looked it at least, but it was surprisingly soft.

So what?

Uh-oh. Haruhiro shook his head. He was doing exactly what Barbara-sensei expected. No, maybe not, but if he let himself be shocked by her feminine softness, he wasn't going to get off with a simple, "Oh, my, Old Cat, feeling a little randy, are we?" She'd be pissed. And hurt him. That was no good.

Barbara-sensei had used Arrest on him a number of times, more than ten, at this point. He knew how it was done. Vaguely. At the very least, his body knew how it felt to be on the receiving end.

I can do this. I should be able to. Let's do this. I'm gonna do it.

"Th-There...!"

I take Barbara-sensei's hand like this, then flex her elbow as far as it will go, and—

"Ahn!"

Suddenly, Barbara-sensei cried out, which made Haruhiro's heart skip a beat, and he couldn't focus on the Arrest.

"You! Idiot...!"

Obviously, Barbara-sensei wouldn't let that slide.

“Uwah?! Oh...?!”

But what in the world did she do to him?

He was probably spun around, then flipped. He lost his sense of balance, and a moment later slammed into the ground. He was upside down. He felt a weight on his back. This had to be Barbara-sensei’s butt. She was pulling on both his legs.

“Whoa! Ah! Barbara-sensei! Ouch! That hurts! This is painful...!”

“I’m hurting you, so of course it does! You let your guard down too much, Old Cat! This is punishment!”

This was *that* thing. Barbara-sensei was sitting on Haruhiro’s back, with one of his legs under each of her armpits. What was it called? Oh, yeah.

The Boston Crab.

That was the name of it. He didn’t know what kind of technique it was, but it was a dangerous one.

“Owwwww...! Barbara-sensei! This isn’t it! This isn’t Arrest! My waist! You’re breaking my back...! S-Spare me...!”

“If you want me to stop, well, squeal for me some more...!”

“Uwahahhahahahah...!”

“More! Give me more...!”

“Giiiiaghhhhahahhahahhahhhahhhahhhahhhahhhhhh....!”

4. The Reason for Loneliness

That was a mess. But, well, Barbara-sensei had always been like that. It was just more of the usual. Still, was she like that to all of her students? And if not, did she *really* hate Haruhiro or something?

“...She seemed to be enjoying herself, though. When she bullied me. I was starting to think that’s just what she’s into...”

Regardless, thanks to Barbara-sensei, he had somehow managed to learn

Arrest. Skills were learned in a training camp system, so he hadn't been able to meet with his comrades during that time. It had only been a few days at most, but he felt a strange sense of nostalgia. Oh, right. He needed to go pick up Moguzo's weapon from Workshop Masukaze, too. Or had Moguzo already done that by himself? While he was wondering all this, he returned to the lodging house, and there was an uproar waiting for him.

"I'm against it! Against it, I say! Totally against it!"

In the courtyard, Ranta and Moguzo, and Yume and Shihoru had broken into two groups, and they were arguing—or rather, it was just Ranta shouting.

"Did you all forget?! The days we spent in this volunteer soldier lodging house?! You're heartless! I never knew you were this heartless! I can't believe this! Seriously, seriously, seriously...!"

"Hey, what's up? What happened?"

When Haruhiro ran over, Ranta said, "Everything's up!" and pointed at Yume and Shihoru angrily. "These people! They started saying cheeky things about leaving the lodging house!"

"No, um..." Moguzo tried to interject.

"You shut up!" Ranta shouted him down. "It's wrong! Leaving this lodging house! It's unbelievable, isn't it?! Right?! You agree, don't you, Haruhiro?! Right?! Of course you do! I knew it! See, Haruhiro agrees with me, so let's drop the whole idea! Drop it! It's done! The end!"

"...Uh, no, I didn't agree with you."

"What'd you saaaaay?! You're going to betray me, Parupiro?!"

"I'm not betraying you... I mean, we're gonna be leaving the lodging house eventually, so it's not that weird it would happen now."

"That's right, huh?" Yume crossed her arms and puffed up her cheeks. She was mad. "Yume, she's used to it now, but the lodgin' house's old, and not very clean, y'know? She's been wantin' to move as soon as she could afford it. Now she can."

"...That's why." Shihoru raised her hand. "Merry... She stays at an inn that's

just for women, so... we were just asking her about it. That was all, but..."

"Which means you're leaving!"

What was Ranta so worked up about? Haruhiro didn't get it.

"What's wrong with leaving? It'll be a step up from this place. Right?"

"Gah...! There it is! There! A step up, huh? Hey, Haruhiro, you think you're too good for this place, huh?!"

"I-I never said that. Not at all..."

"You think you're so great?!"

"Oh, drop it already! You're pissing me off!"

"Is that because you think you're so great, huh?!"

"Man—"

Haruhiro was seeing red.

Whoa, that's not good. Ranta. This guy's got a gift for rubbing people the wrong way. But I won't fall for it. I'm not gonna snap at him for real.

Haruhiro sighed, and relaxed. Then he looked at Ranta.

Yeah, even just looking at him pisses me off. His face, his hair, everything. No, no. Keep it under control.

"What's gotten into you, Ranta? Drop the nonsense, and if there's a reason you think Yume and Shihoru shouldn't move out, explain it properly."

"I-I have explained, damn it!"

"Well, put it in terms I can understand."

"L-Like I said!" Ranta looked away and kicked the dirt. "...There's reasons! Lots of 'em! Like, uh... the memories! This place is full of them, and you know it. Here, there, and everywhere."

"Memories..."

"Yeah, that's right! You want to throw all that away?! Just because things are going a little better. Is that what you think? You're all seriously okay with that?!"

Yume, Shihoru, and Moguzo—they all hung their heads in unison.

Haruhiro covered the bottom half of his face with his hand. What was Ranta trying to say? Was he trying to get something across without saying it directly? Haruhiro knew what it was. Probably, they all did.

There was no way they couldn't.

They had lived here with *him*. It was only a short while. But he was here.

He was their comrade.

He was more reliable than anyone, and their leader.

"...That's what I'm talking about."

Ranta sniffed, then let out a big sigh.

"I'm all for moving up in the world. But that's not the issue here."

"Well, yeah..." Haruhiro scratched his head. "But wanting to earn more, wanting to eat better, wanting to live in a better place... all those things can help motivate us."

"You're shallow. Too damn shallow! That's the problem with you, Haruhiro. You're so unsophisticated!"

"And you aren't...?"

"You won't find many people as high-minded as me."

"Oh, yeah...?" Shihoru said coldly.

"Hah!" Ranta shrugged his shoulders. "You philistines wouldn't get it. My high-minded thinking, that is. Besides, what's so great about an inn that only caters to women? Only women can get in, right? That's unnatural. There are men, and there are women. It's just wrong that there would only be women. Seriously."

"Ohhh..." Moguzo nodded, a knowing look of exasperation on his face.

The real truth comes out, huh? Haruhiro shook his head.

"That's what it's really about, huh...?"

"Wh-What's what it's really about? What're you talking about?! Say it,

moron!”

“Basically, the idea Yume and Shihoru might leave the lodging house is making you feel lonely, right?”

“Huhhhhhhhhh?! Wha?! What the hell?! When did I say that?!”

“Lonely...?” Yume furrowed her brow and stuck out her bottom lip. “Ranta, are you gonna be lonely if Yume and Shihoru end up leavin’ the lodgin’ house?”

“I-I-I-I-I’m not lonely! Like I’d ever feel lonely! M-Me? Never! D-D-D-D-Don’t be ridiculous!”

Ranta’s face turned bright red, and spit flew everywhere. He was super —*confused*. Totally confused. *He’s clearly losing it. What’s gotten into this guy?*

Haruhiro had pointed out that he’d be lonely. That was, uh, a roundabout way of touching on the issue.

If Yume and Shihoru lived in the same place, that provided a variety of opportunities. This wasn’t a battlefield where they couldn’t afford to relax, so they were bound to show some openings, even if they were girls. There was no guarantee he wouldn’t be able to get away with the occasional, “Whoops, sorry,” or, “No, really, it was a coincidence, I mean it.”

Ranta was keeping an eye out for any such chance. In other words, he was an animal. An absolute beast.

If Yume and Shihoru moved out, he would have zero chance to do that.

Haruhiro had addressed it mildly, indirectly, by saying it was making him feel lonely. He couldn’t very well have said, “You won’t be able to peep on them anymore, right?”

That would have been stirring up a hornet’s nest.

Though it was largely Ranta’s fault, Haruhiro and Moguzo had a record of doing that, too. —But.

From the way Ranta was acting, it might actually have been making him feel lonely.

“I-I-I’m not! At all! I-I-I’m not lonely! I don’t get it! I don’t get how you losers

think! It makes no sense!”

Ranta cleared his throat, then rubbed the bottom of his nose with the palm of his hand.

“Anyway! That’s not it! I’m not lonely, no way!”

“Hmm...” Yume sandwiched her cheeks with her hands. It flattened her face in a funny way. “Well, okay. Now that she’s thinkin’ about it, it makes Yume feel just a little bit lonely, too.”

“Wha...?” Ranta started flipping out again. “I-It does? Y-You feel... lonely? Wh-Why...?”

“Because it’s where our adventures end for the day.”

Adventures... Haruhiro didn’t entirely disagree that that was what they were, so he decided not to poke fun at her.

Yume was pressing on her cheeks. Because of that, her voice was funny, too, not just her face.

“Everyone comes back here, right? Not Merry-chan, though. When we take baths, go to sleep, and wake up, everyone’s here.”

“We are... yeah,” Moguzo mumbled, looking to the courtyard. That made Shihoru look at the yard and the buildings, too.

“We’re already used to it, y’know?” Yume said with a sigh, “Completely. If things ended up bein’ different, Yume’d feel kinda lonely...”

“I-I know, right?!” Ranta suddenly was full of energy. “That’s how it is, isn’t it?! That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you! Habits are important!”

“Ranta, man, you didn’t say anything about that...”

“Shove it, Haruhiro! I was saying it in my heart! My heart was shouting it loud and clear!”

“I can’t hear your heart.”

“That’s because you lack training! Train more! Train, train! Train like crazy!”

“Train at what...?”

“Figure that much out yourself, moron! Now, moving on...!” Ranta put his hands on his hips and thrust his chest out. “This discussion is over! We’re going to live happily ever after here at the lodging house, right guys?! Right?! It’s decided!”

Shihoru looked at Yume, then down at the ground. It seemed Yume was undecided.

“...I’ll think about it longer. Together with Yume.”

5. That is That

After that, Haruhiro went to the craftsmen’s town with Moguzo. They were going there to pick up the weapon, of course. Moguzo had apparently been thinking about going by himself, but ultimately he decided to wait for Haruhiro. They had gone to the workshop together in the first place, so he wanted to do the pickup together, too. The reasoning kind of made sense to him, and kind of didn’t, but it was very like Moguzo, and Haruhiro was kind of happy about that. It was like they weren’t just comrades, they were friends.

On top of that, there was a surprise waiting.

There was a familiar figure standing in front of the narrow road that led to Workshop Masukaze.

“Merry?!”

“Merry-san?!”

“Oh...” Merry looked their way, started to wave, and then stopped. She hung her head, but looked up again immediately. There was something resembling a smile, but it was awfully awkward.

She was acting shy.

When she showed an expression like that, Haruhiro didn’t know what to do. Moguzo was fidgeting, too.

Yeah, man. I know. I’m not sure what to do, either. I mean, it’s not a problem. But what is it?

Haruhiro's heart was racing.

"Erm..."

No, this is no good.

If Haruhiro kept panicking, he'd make it awkward for Merry.

Work up the courage. Courage? No, I don't really need courage. This isn't a situation that requires that I be bold. I don't think it is. It's probably not. Probably.

"H-Huh? Wh-What's up, Merry? I-Is this a coincidence? It's... not, right...?"

"Yeah..." Merry brought a hand to her chest, taking a breath. "I thought you might be coming soon. To pick up the weapon. We came together, so I thought..."

Merry was saying something that kind of made sense to him, and kind of didn't. But he got it. He did. It was that kind of thing. Haruhiro and Moguzo looked at one another. *Right?* You might wonder what exactly was right, but right now, Haruhiro and Moguzo definitely both thought "Right?" It was something Ranta probably wouldn't get. This was something only he and Moguzo could both understand.

Moguzo wasn't the proactive type. Neither was Haruhiro. He wasn't outgoing like Kikkawa, and he couldn't come out and say everything he thought. He couldn't open up and become friends with just anyone. He wasn't that kind of person.

And, probably, Merry—or at least the current Merry—was the same way. Despite that, she came.

She must have struggled with it. Though she managed to overcome indecision and come here, she still would have had to wait a long time. Maybe she even tried to turn back. But Merry still stayed. She waited all this time. —*Right?*

Seeing this sort of thing makes you pretty happy, huh?

"Ohhh, I see! I see. In that case... you could've come by the lodging house. Right, Moguzo?"

"Y-Yeah. Th-That's right. Yeah."

“...I considered it.” Merry’s voice was awfully tiny. It was as quiet as a mosquito’s. “—Sorry. I felt a little... hesitant to.”

“No need to apologize! Right, Moguzo?! She doesn’t have to apologize, right?!”

“R-Right! In fact, we should, because of that, right?!”

“Yeah! I mean, there was that thing!”

“Th-That thing, right?!”

“That thing, yeah! You know the one, right?!”

Haruhiro and Moguzo slapped each other on the shoulder, going on about *that thing*, but what even was it? Haruhiro didn’t know. He didn’t have a clue. Moguzo probably had no idea what *that* was, either.

It didn’t matter. They didn’t know. That was that. Besides, Merry burst out laughing, and though it was just a little, she smiled, too.

I could stare at Merry’s smile forever. I can’t deny I feel that way. Moguzo probably feels the same. But if I did that, I feel like it’d be awkward for Merry. So I won’t.

“Well, let’s go, then! Everyone’s here!”

“Y-Yeah! Let’s go, Merry-san!”

“S-Sure.”

If anyone was watching them, they’d make for an odd group, and it was kind of awkward. But so what? This was way better than how they started out. Eventually, they’d be able to interact more naturally. They just had to take things step by step. It was fine to get there slowly but surely.

“Helloooo...!”

Moguzo opened the door to Workshop Masukaze cheerfully, and with incredible vigor. Haruhiro went “Whoa...” despite himself.

They were greeted by that Trigon, as before, but it was larger than last time, for some reason. He couldn’t say what it was exactly, but the shape was different, too. It had a threatening air about it, like it was coming at them.

Though it was made of iron, it felt raw, like it was alive. It seemed oddly real.

“Th-This is...?”

Moguzo was weirded out. Merry cocked her head to the side, just staring at it.

“Hello, welco—” Riyosuke the blacksmith poked his head out from the back of the shop, then pulled it back in. Actually, he’d retreated into the smithy in the back.

Haruhiro went, “Huh?” and looked at Moguzo and Merry in confusion. “H-He ran away... right? Just now? Why...?”

“No, no.” Riyosuke came out again, this time scratching his head. “I kid, I kid. Welcome. What business brings you to this workshop?”

“What business...?” Moguzo looked quickly around the workshop. “Um, obviously, I’m here to pick up the weapon I left with you.”

“Oh, ho. And what sort of weapon might that be?”

“Wh-What kind of weapon...? I-I left it here, right? Y-You’re not going to tell me you forgot, or something...?”

“Hrm...” Riyosuke crossed his arms. “Nngh...” He looked up to the ceiling. “Hmmm... What was it again...?”

“No, no.” Haruhiro laughed despite himself. “There’s no way you don’t remember. Not a chance. We left Death Spots’ sword with you, right? You gave us an estimate and everything. It should be done by now, right?”

“Did you?” Riyosuke asked with a serious look on his face.

“What is with this guy...?” Merry muttered. She could say that again. What *was* with this guy? Was this bad? He had seemed like a bit of a weirdo, but maybe it was far worse than that. Had he tricked them into letting him steal Death Spots’ sword?

Haruhiro suddenly noticed Moguzo was shaking. His hands were balled into fists, and he was trembling.

Is he mad...?

“It was supposed to be done, right?”

Moguzo's voice was super threatening. But still polite. He was managing to just barely suppress his anger, but he could go off at any second. Riyosuke seemed to pick up on the fact he might have a dangerous customer on his hands. He suddenly smiled. "I kid, I kid," he said, "Yes, done... is what it was supposed to be."

"But?" Haruhiro asked.

"Well..." Riyosuke rubbed the back of his head bashfully. "I did plan to finish it. While I was working on the design, I got a bit ambitious."

"...Ambitious?" Merry cocked her head to the side.

"Yes, it's a bad habit of mine. I want to do this. I want to do that. I have to do this. —Once it occurs to me, I can't not do it. I think all craftsmen are like that to one degree or another."

"So, basically..." Haruhiro said, looking at the Trigon, "It's not done yet?"

"Precisely."

"You admitted that easily..."

"Because it's a fact, you know."

Riyosuke nodded sagely. Why was this guy so happy?

Moguzo's voice quivered as, "Wh-When...?" he asked the obvious question. "When will it be done by?"

"About that..." Riyosuke put on a serious look and pointed straight upwards. "'God only knows' is all I can say."

"You know that's not going to cut it, right?"

Nice, Merry. That was scary.

Riyosuke was a bit spooked.

"I-If you give me a day or two..."

Immediately, "That's too vague," Merry coldly pressed him.

"Ah..." Riyosuke brought his hands together in front of his chest. "By tomorrow...?"

“Be more precise.”

“I’ll have it for you by 8:00 AM tomorrow! You’ve come to the right place.”

Haruhiro couldn’t help but glance at the Trigon.

“...I feel like I’ve heard that before. That exact same line.”

“I’ll get right on it.” Riyosuke gave them a thumbs up, then ran into the smithy in the back.

Moguzo’s shoulders slumped in disappointment, and Merry looked at him with pity.

Haruhiro hesitantly touched the Trigon.

“...But that guy definitely made major changes to this thing. Is it gonna be okay...?”

6. The Terror Returns

The bell rang to tell the time.

8:00 am.

Haruhiro and the others were in front of Workshop Masukaze.

It wasn’t just Haruhiro, Moguzo, and Merry today. Ranta, Yume, and Shihoru were here, too. Once they picked up the weapon, they planned to go out hunting right away. Everyone was ready to go. All they needed was Moguzo’s weapon.

“W-Well...” Moguzo opened the door to Workshop Masukaze.

“Whoa...?!” Ranta doubled over backwards.

“Eek...!” Shihoru hugged Yume, and, “Nyoh!” Yume let out a strange cry in response.

Haruhiro, Moguzo, and Merry all gulped.

The wheeled dragon-horse, the Trigon, was sitting on the other side of the door, as always. And, as far as Haruhiro could tell, the shape of its head was slightly different than yesterday. Had he worked on it again? But, more

importantly...

“Welcome.” Riyosuke the blacksmith was kneeling in front of the Trigon.

That was fine. But why?

Why was Riyosuke naked from the waist up?

Also, why was there an unsheathed dagger lying in front of his knees?

He had a pensive look on his face. There was something almost pathetic about it.

“What business brings you to this workshop?” But, judging by the way he said that again...

This guy is certified.

“What business...?” Haruhiro said that much, then stopped.

Riyosuke nodded silently. “I kid.” He closed his eyes. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“...U-Um,” Moguzo hesitantly asked, “Where is the w-weapon I left with you...?”

“I thought you might ask.”

“Huh...? Well, y-yeah, I mean, that’s about the only business I have here, isn’t it...?”

“That’s why! I told you I was waiting, didn’t I?!”

He was acting angry when he was in the wrong...?

Yeah. That had to be it.

That was unmistakably what he was doing. It was nothing if not that.

None of them—not even Ranta—could say anything in response. They were awed by Riyosuke’s strange intensity.

“Now listen here!” Riyosuke’s eyes snapped open. “I accepted your weapon! That much is true! Yesterday, I told you it would be ready for 8:00 AM tomorrow! I told you that, indeed! However! That’s no guarantee it will actually happen! Nothing is certain! Nothing! Is that not how life is?! It is, right?! Am I

saying anything wrong? I'm not, am I? No, indeed, I am not! Would life be interesting if everything went according to plan, people?! It would be dull, right?! Not knowing what will happen! That is life! Yes, that is where the joy of life lies! In other words...! This is life...!"

"...What's this guy goin' on about?" Yume asked Shihoru.

Shihoru seemed troubled over how to respond, and simply said, "I-I dunno..." and shook her head.

"So, what you're saying is..." Merry stepped up. "It's not done yet?"

Riyosuke closed his eyes and shook his head diagonally. Why diagonally...?

"I never said that."

"Th-Then..." Moguzo said, gulping, "Is... it done?"

"How shallow!"

"...Shallow?"

"That question is shallow! Yes or no! Black or white! Is life so simple? No, I say! No...!"

"But that one's a 'no', huh...?" Haruhiro couldn't help but point that out. Riyosuke had just finished saying you couldn't divide things into black and white like that, after all. However, Riyosuke smiled placidly.

"There are times when we must come up with an answer. That, too, is life."

"Hey..." Ranta pointed at Riyosuke. "Everything this guy says is crazy. None of it makes any sense..."

"You're not really one to talk, though..."

"What was that, Haruhiro?! What's crazy about me?! I'm the most logical person in the world!"

"Yeah!"

"See! The old man agrees with—Wait, huh...?"

"Yes?"

Riyosuke seemed unfazed as Ranta looked at him. Ranta pointed to himself,

then at Riyosuke, then back again.

“We’ve never met before, right...?”

“You could say that, yes.”

“...Huh? What do you mean we *could* say we’ve never met before...?”

“That’s a good question.”

“Y-You think?”

“Yes. But it is a deep one. Would you consider it with me until we come to an answer?”

“No, I’m not gonna... I don’t think. And hold on, what’s up with this old guy?”

Could it be?

Was he trying to dodge the issue, and hope they would just sort of forget about it in the confusion...?

“...I get it.” Merry stepped further forward, slamming the end of her staff down between Riyosuke and his dagger. “If you felt cornered, you planned to get out of it by making a scene of how you might commit seppuku with this dagger, right? I see how you work.”

Riyosuke looked up at Merry... and grinned. There was still composure in his expression, but he was sweating.

“It seems you’ve misunderstood me.”

“Have I?”

“I’d never commit seppuku. Perish the thought.”

“I don’t think you’d actually go through with it. You’d just pretend.”

Riyosuke looked Merry in the eye for a while, then, lowering his eyes, “...You’re good,” he mumbled. “Truly, it has been three years since someone last stopped me from using this trick. Whew, you sure got me. I give. I get it. Let’s be frank here, huh? Frank! Yes, frank...!”

“Why say the same thing three times...?” Shihoru asked, shuddering, but Riyosuke cried out for the forbidden fourth time.

“Here I goooo! Frank—”

Whoosh... Merry’s staff grazed Riyosuke’s cheek. That priest’s staff of hers was no mere decoration. There was a red line left on Riyosuke’s cheek. —*Blood. He’s bleeding.*

“Be frank. When will it be done?”

“...This afternoon?”

“What time?”

“Nine, no, ten—”

“You mean to tell me it will take until night?”

“Huh? No, 6:00 pm... or thereabouts.”

“Thereabouts?”

“By 4:00 pm! No, I was trying to act cool! 4:00 is impossible! By 6:00...!”

“6:00 pm on the dot, okay?”

“Yes!”

“Do you know what will happen if you’re late?”

“...I have some idea.”

“Get it done this time.”

Merry retracted her staff and turned away from Riyosuke.

In that moment, “Whew...” Riyosuke let out a sigh. *I’m saved. I got through that somehow. I made it.* You could maybe see those thoughts in his expression.

As if to say, “How naive,” Merry spun around and thrust her priest’s staff at the end of Riyosuke’s nose.

“Listen. Do *not* disappoint me.”

“...Understood.”

“We will come at 6:00 pm.”

“...I will be waiting.”

Even Riyosuke had gone a little pale now, and he stared at the end of her

staff. Cross-eyed. His eyes were as crossed as they came.

Merry used her staff to poke Riyosuke in the nose.

“Eek!”

Without so much as a glance to Riyosuke as he flipped over, Merry left the workshop.

“...What a scary woman,” Ranta whispered. Maybe he shouldn’t have been saying that about a comrade. But, to be frank, Haruhiro felt pretty much the same. Obviously he couldn’t tell Merry that. Or rather, if he said the words, “To be frank,” in front of Merry after what had just happened, he was sure something terrifying would befall him...

Regardless, now that Merry had walked out, he couldn’t just leave her. Telling Riyosuke, “Well, we’ll be back at 6:00 pm today!” he left the workshop, but he couldn’t see Merry when he did, and he panicked a little. “M-Merry...?!”

He dashed down the narrow road. He looked right. Then left.

There she was.

Merry had come to a stop, hanging her head. What was up? Her back was to Haruhiro, so he couldn’t see her expression. But she looked... depressed, somehow?

He couldn’t call out to her. As he hesitated, Yume moseyed right over to her, circling around to her front, and peered at her face.

“Merry-chan? Is somethin’ up?”

“I’m sorry. I...”

“Foo?”

“Just now—that was...”

Ranta walked over with large strides. “Heh!” He gave her a thumbs up. “Not bad. That was some nice intimidation. I guess they didn’t call you Scary Merry for nothing!”

“...!” Merry shook her head.

Haruhiro traded glances with Shihoru and Moguzo who had caught up with

them. Merry was clearly acting strange. At the very least, she wasn't smirking and thinking, *I sure showed him*. If anything, it was the opposite. *I messed up, I failed*—or something like that?

Yume was trying to say something to Merry, but though her mouth flapped open and closed, all that came out was, “Uhh,” and, “Nngh,” or, “Mew.” Nothing resembling actual words.

Ranta turned to Haruhiro, and cocked his head to the side.

“...What?”

No, man, it's because you started calling her Scary Merry.

But was that really it? Was that all?

Suddenly, Merry took a deep breath and raised her face. She looked around to each of them. Was that a smile? It was a forced one. And without putting in real effort.

“Well, see you again here, at 6:00.”

With that, Merry took off running. No, she wasn't quite running, but she was definitely walking fast. Merry was taking off.

“What's with her...?” Ranta spat, but by that time Merry was far off in the distance.

I have to go after her. But what do I even say?

Haruhiro didn't know. Pathetically, his legs refused to move.

7. Heart, Open

That said, leaving it like that bothered him. How could it not? He'd be crazy not to be bothered.

They decided to split up and each do their own thing until 6:00, but Haruhiro already knew how he planned to spend his time.

I'll look for Merry.

He had some idea where to look. Alterna seemed like a big place, but it was

small in a lot of ways too. If he wandered around, he suspected he'd come across her soon enough.

As he did a bit of this, and a bit of that, the bell indicating it was now 12:00 rang and he was still alone.

"Whaa... Seriously? I haven't found her..."

Haruhiro crouched down, powerlessly, in the corner of a plaza that was somewhere near the center of Alterna.

A tall building called Tenboro Tower was across the plaza from here. The tower was the abode of the margrave. Garlan Vedoy. Ruler of Alterna. — Apparently. He knew the name of the guy, but he'd never seen him, and honestly, "there's a big shot with that name," was all he really knew. Well, a volunteer soldier like Haruhiro was unlikely to ever encounter someone that important, anyway.

"...It doesn't matter."

Maybe I'll get lunch. Though, even that seems like a hassle. But I'm hungry. My stomach's empty, but I'm in no mood to eat.

While he was loitering around, he heard a voice in the distance.

"Huh?! Haruhiro-kun?!"

"...Moguzo."

Moguzo rushed over.

"What's up, Haruhiro-kun? What are you doing here?"

"Hmm. No, nothing's really 'up.' I'm not doing anything..."

"Erm..." Moguzo looked like he felt awkward, but he still spoke. "Were you able to meet up with Merry-san?"

"Uh... Wh-Why would I be meeting Merry?"

"Well. This morning, Merry-san was acting a little strange. 'Maybe Haruhiro-kun got worried, and went looking for her,' I was thinking. To tell you the truth, I was searching for her, too, sort of."

"O-Ohhh... Yeah. Merry was acting weird. Yep. Well, you know. I guess it

bothered me? Of course it did. I mean, we're comrades and all..."

"I-I know, right? We're comrades. And you're our leader."

"Technically I am, yeah? It doesn't really suit me, and it feels embarrassing, though..."

"But you really were looking for Merry-san, right?"

"Uhhh.... Yeah, but not, like, super hard or anything. I was just idly looking around, too..."

I was looking, yeah? I looked around a lot. —He was hesitant to tell Moguzo. He didn't want the guy guessing about what he was really up to. Haruhiro was doing this with pure intentions, as her comrade, and as the leader, because he was concerned for Merry. That was all.

"W-Well then, Haruhiro-kun, um... if you're looking for her anyway, why don't we search together?"

"Good idea!" Haruhiro jumped up. "L-Let's do that! It might be easier to find her that way. Yeah. Oh, Moguzo, you had lunch yet? No? Then let's eat somewhere around here. At a stall in the market, or wherever. Just something light. Merry's gotta be eating somewhere, too, right? I'm sure of it."

On that note, they headed to Dory's Skewers in the market, and Yume and Shihoru were already there.

"Hah...!"

Shihoru had a skewer stuffed in her mouth at the time, and was awfully embarrassed about it.

Yume, on the other hand, went, "Unyoh!" her eyes going wide, and finished devouring the meat she was already working on.

"Hey, it's Haru-kun, and Moguzo. You here for some meat?"

"Yeah." Moguzo nodded, and immediately ordered a skewer. "I'll have two. No, make that three."

"...You're ordering three right off the bat? That's amazing, Moguzo. I'll just have one."

“Nah. I know one’s not going to be enough. Two might be, but Dory’s skewers are delicious, and I’m here already...”

“Ohhh. Yeah, you’re right. It’s weird how good the meat here is.”

“Yeah. Yume, she was askin’ Shihoru what we oughta do for the afternoon, and Shihoru, she said we should go to Dory’s.”

“...I-I couldn’t think of anything else. That’s all... Oh!”

Shihoru hurriedly turned her head to the old man who ran the stall, and bowed her head.

“U-Umm, y-your meat is delicious. Really. I-I love it, too...”

The old man gave her a magnanimous smile. Thinking back, Haruhiro had first visited this stall when he was a volunteer soldier trainee. The guy seemed to recognize their faces, so you might be able to say they were regulars.

The number of places in Alterna where that was true for them was slowly but surely increasing.

Was it the same for Merry? She must have had places she frequented, too.

While eating his skewer, Haruhiro decided to ask Yume and Shihoru.

“Hey, we were thinking of looking for Merry. I mean, yeah, I know we’ll see her at 6:00, but... this morning, she was acting a bit strange, right? That’s got me a little concerned.”

“...Us, too, actually.”

Shihoru had finished her skewer and moved on to a drink she had bought from another stall. It was a carbonated drink flavored with herbs and honey. It cost 2 copper, but if you returned the thin earthenware cup to the stall, you got 1 copper back.

“We were worried about Merry... I was keeping an eye out for her as we were looking around the market...”

By the way, why did Shihoru pause after saying, “Merry...”? Was it that? They were comrades, so it was natural to refer to her without the honorific, and she was trying to do that. But because she wasn’t used to it, there was some

hesitance—was that it?

If Haruhiro's guess was right, it might make things awkward if he drew attention to it.

She'd get used to it eventually. Even if it took time.

But time was not unlimited. It could run out tomorrow.

Shihoru likely knew that they weren't guaranteed to live to see tomorrow. She was more painfully aware of that than any of them. That might have been why Shihoru was doing everything she could to close the emotional distance between her and Merry.

They might have time to relax, and they might not.

"Where do you think Merry-chan's gone off to?" Yume asked between bites, "Did she already go back to the inn?"

"...I-If she did, we can't go see her, huh?" Moguzo groaned, holding the three skewers in both hands.

...He's already done eating all three? That was fast!

"The inn, huh..." Haruhiro slapped his left palm against his forehead. "...Come to think of it, what's Ranta up to? Does anyone know?"

"Yume, she hasn't seen, and she doesn't know."

"...I haven't, either. And I don't particularly care..."

"Oh. Ranta-kun was saying something about a game."

"A game?"

What kind of showdown might that be? Haruhiro had no idea, but he did have a bad feeling about it. This was Ranta, after all. Nothing good would come of leaving him to his own devices. Though, monitoring him all the time would be too exhausting. If he had to watch Ranta 24-7, he'd start to seriously hate the guy.

For now, he'd forget Ranta and search for Merry with the other four. It was hard to imagine she would be in the eastern part of the city where the mages' guild was, or the western part where the thieves' and dread knights' guilds

were. Was she in the southern district where their lodgings and the craftsmen's town were? Or in the northern district where the marketplace, Flower Garden Street, and Celestial Alley were? When they went to leave the market and check Flower Garden Street, there was a crowd gathered along the way.

"Aww, yeahhhhhh...!"

That voice, coming from the other side of the crowd...

"That's Ranta talkin', isn't it?"

"Y-Yeah."

"...We should ignore him."

Haruhiro understood how Shihoru felt, but he couldn't do it. He was the leader, after all. And, well, the guy was technically their comrade, right?

He pushed through the crowd, and found Ranta with some other men sitting around a low wooden table.

"Ranta, man..."

"Huh? Well, if it isn't Haruhiro. What're you doing here, man?"

"No, I was going to ask you that... What're you doing?"

"Can't you tell?"

Ranta showed Haruhiro the rectangular cards he was holding. He had four or five of them, and there were pictures drawn on each. Looking closer, there were a number of similar cards not lined up on the table, but scattered across it.

"I'm in the middle of a game here. Obviously, right? I am a natural gamer, born to game, the game master, got it?"

"...Okay then. I've never heard that before, though."

"Okay, my turn! This is how you do it!"

Ranta slammed his card down on the table, flipping two other cards over at the same time.

"Yesssss...! A double! I got a doubllllllllle...!"

“Damn it!”

Another dirty, red-faced man slammed his card onto the table, flipping over three cards.

“There! How’d you like that...?!”

Ranta and the other men cried out, “A triple...?!” and clutched their heads.

“...Ranta, you’ve got money on this, don’t you? I know you do.”

“Huh?! Of course I do! What fun’d it be if I didn’t make any money?! I couldn’t get serious without that!”

“So... you’re winning, then?”

“Hah!” Ranta looked away. “I’m just getting started! This is where I turn things around! It’s gonna be a huge turnaround...!”

“...I’m not gonna ask how much you’ve already lost. I’m kind of scared to. But keep it under control, okay?”

“You dolt! In every game, it’s all or nothing! There’s no keeping it under control! You didn’t know that, you moron?! You dunce! Go die in agony from hemorrhoids!”

Was he gonna play until he went bust? Haruhiro was worried, but couldn’t muster the will to stop him. He wasn’t going to listen anyway. In fact, the more Haruhiro told him to cut it out, the more stubborn Ranta would get. In that case, leaving him alone was for the best.

“Well, give it your best shot.”

“I’ll do that without you telling me to! I’m gonna go until I win back the 1 gold I—”

“1 gold...?! Man, you lost 1 gold?!”

“It’s still only 1 gold! I’ve got all the money I need! The guy with the most money wins these things in the end...!”

“You sure he doesn’t get taken for a fool and lose everything instead...?”

“Quiet! Shut your mouth, and go away! Get lost! Just get lost, Parupiro!”

“Sure, I’ll go. —Oh, but before I do. Just to be sure, you haven’t seen Merry, have you?”

“Huh? Yeah, I saw her.”

“Huh?”

“By the bridge, a few hours ago, when I went back to the lodging house. I totally ignored her, though. She was looking down, and completely ignored me, too. What about it?”

“She was there?! Near the lodging house?! Merry?!”

“Yeah, like I already said. But it was a while ago. She’s gone off somewhere else by now. I mean, what was she even doing there?”

Haruhiro just told Ranta, “Know when to pack it in!” and ran off through the crowd. It seemed Moguzo, Yume, and Shihoru had been listening to their conversation. They all nodded to one another and then hurried to the lodging house.

According to Ranta, he’d seen Merry hours ago. That meant it was before noon. It was a little hard to imagine she’d still be on the bridge by the lodging house. She had to be gone by now. There was no way she’d be there. But still, they had no other lead, so even if she almost certainly wasn’t going to be there, there was a non-zero chance she would be.

“Meow! That’s Merry-chan over there, isn’t it?”

Yume, as a hunter, had good eyes, and was the first to spot Merry.

The bridge. She’s there. It’s Merry. There’s no mistaking her. She’s standing on top of the bridge.

“Merry...!”

“Merry-san...!”

“M-Merry...!”

“Merry-chan...!”

The four of them called out to her in unison, and Merry turned their way. Her eyes widened in surprise. Of course they did. Anyone would be startled to have

their name yelled so loudly. Besides, it was probably embarrassing for her, too. If Haruhiro were Merry, he might have run away despite himself.

Merry didn't run. She held her staff tightly, and waited for them.

They all dashed to the bridge, so they were out of breath. On top of his heavy breathing, Haruhiro had no idea what he should say. There had to be things he wanted to say, but his head was a mess now.

Merry furrowed her brow a little, her lips drawing taut as she regarded Haruhiro and the others. She seemed like she was trying to say something, too, but couldn't find the words.

Eventually, Shihoru just said, "Wh..." before closing her mouth. It was a while before she managed to open her mouth again and finish saying, "Why...?"

"I..." Merry lowered her eyes. "I'm so—" She was likely about to apologize. I'm sorry, she'd say. That was the one thing he didn't want to let her do. Merry had nothing to apologize for.

"Thank goodness!" Haruhiro said in the cheeriest voice he could. That was kind of out of place, and an awkward air hung between them.

Ouch. I missed that one bad. Why couldn't I say something more considerate? I want to cry. But if I cry, this is guaranteed to get even worse, so I won't.

"...Th-Thank goodness. Um, for, uh, what was it again...? Thank goodness we found you. Oh! This isn't me being, like, weirdly overblown about how great it is we were able to meet you in the first place—"

Aghhhhhh! This is no good. Haruhiro nearly dropped to the ground and started writhing in agony. The more he spoke, the more awkward it got.

Merry was listening to him seriously, but ultimately, she cocked her head to the side, wondering, *What is this guy even trying to say?*

Fair. That's absolutely fair.

Haruhiro felt like maybe he knew himself, or maybe he didn't. No, he didn't know. What was it again? What had he been trying to talk about?

"B-Basically... In other words... How do I put this...? It's like..."

Perhaps unable to bear watching him any longer, “Come to think of it,” Yume interjected. “How long’ve you been here, Merry-chan?”

“I’ve probably been here since...” Merry trailed off and then, in a very small voice, “9:00 or so...?” she concluded.

“...9:00,” Shihoru said, looking to Haruhiro.

“...9:00?” Haruhiro said, looking to Moguzo.

“9-9:00...” Moguzo said, looking to Yume.

“9:00... Hold on. Nnngh...” Yume thought about it, blinking. “That’s a long time, yeah? You said 9:00, but it’s past noon now... Whaaaaa! That’s a real long time...!”

“...I wanted to explain.” Merry shrank into herself a little, quivering. “...I thought if I waited here, someone might come by.”

“Um...” Moguzo ducked his head, shrinking no less than Merry had, and hunched his back. “Explain what?”

“...About what happened at Workshop Masukaze. My attitude there, you could say...”

“Mwah. The way you were actin’ in the blacksmith’s, it was so decisive, and cool.”

“...S-Stop. It was wrong. I shouldn’t be like that.”

“Really...?” It seemed Shihoru was a little angry, thinking back to the way Riyosuke the blacksmith had handled them. “I think you need to be harsh with people like that... Not that I could do it myself. I’m too timid... I lack the confidence, I think...”

“I don’t... have confidence in myself, either.”

“M-Me, either!”

“Yume, she’s not confident in herself either, y’know?”

“...I don’t, either.”

What is this? What is going on here? Is this a lack of confidence confession relay, or something?

Though, as their leader, should Haruhiro really have been declaring his lack of confidence? He didn't have any, of course, but who wanted a leader like that? If he was a leader, honestly, even if he lacked confidence, he felt like maybe he should pretend he had it.

"Uh, no!"

Haruhiro clapped his hands, and everyone looked at him. They were a bit surprised. He felt bad about that.

"Merry... I-It was just a means to an end. I think that's why you acted like that. You did it for us. Knowing how it looked. Yeah. That's it... Right?"

"Yes, but..."

"Huh? But?"

"If I didn't have a part of me that's like that... I don't think I could act that way. That may be how I really am."

"Really? Yume, she thinks you're a nice girl, Merry-chan. Because you're nice. Hmm. Yume's not sayin' anything but 'nice,' but, y'know, if you weren't nice—Yume doesn't think you'd've done that if you weren't nice."

Yeah. I get it. I get what you're going for, Yume, but... please, stop!

If you tell most people that to their face, they'll get embarrassed! Merry looks super embarrassed now, as a matter of fact!

"Erm..." Moguzo probably wanted to smooth that over, but he couldn't come up with a good way, so he clutched his head and groaned.

Okay!

Time for me to be a leader!

Haruhiro was fired up, but he couldn't think of a good idea.

"Th-The important thing is...!"

Shihoru. Shihoru's helping. Thank you, Shihoru.

"Th-That you tried... to talk to us... I think. That you want to talk to us... That, um, it... it makes me happy."

“I know, right?!” Haruhiro put on a big grin, and shouted. Then was aghast at himself for doing it.

I want to be a more refined person someday. It's not likely to happen, though.

“...Yeah. That's right. As your comrade, it makes me happy, too, you know? It's, uh, what should I say? I don't think what we talk about matters. No, it does matter, and talking about things is important, it's that, uh... Well, as a prerequisite? We need an environment where we can talk. Whether we have that or not is the first issue, I guess? Hrm... Is it okay for me to be like this? Yeah, it's no good...”

“It's not no good.” Merry shook her head. Then she came out and clearly said, “You're not ‘no good,’ Haru.”

“...Really?”

Uh, oh. I feel like I'm gonna start grinning.

Haruhiro forced himself to keep a straight face. He was sure there was a crease in his eyelids right now.

“W-Well... Yeah. Yeah, I guess that's right, huh? Looking down on myself like that, it's not good. Though, if I had the sort of baseless self-confidence that Ranta has, that would be a problem, too. A-Anyway, about what happened at the blacksmith's. Nobody thinks anything of it. You don't have to worry. Besides, look at what we were dealing with. I don't really get that Riyosuke guy, but, you know, I think we probably needed to threaten him that much.”

“About that.” Merry sighed. The look in her eyes suddenly seemed to get... sharper? “I've been thinking about it. —I may not have done enough. People like him never learn. I think we should keep an eye on him. He needs to be controlled.”

Haruhiro shuddered. *Maybe that is what Merry is really like*, he thought.

But it turned out, Merry was absolutely correct. When they rounded up Ranta and headed to Workshop Masukaze, Riyosuke the blacksmith was messing around with the Trigon's head.

“Ah! No! This is, um, I'm just blowing off steam! I'm just about to get started

in—”

“Hurry it up,” Merry ordered him coldly, not raising her voice. Honestly, Merry was really scary when she was like this. That was probably not something she could imitate, even if she tried. Was it something she was born with?

Her real self, huh?

Even if it was, there was more to Merry than just that.

It wasn't just Merry. Everyone had a number of different faces. They changed depending on the situation, and people changed over time, too. In the future, maybe Ranta might stop being annoying—Okay, no, not that. That seemed improbable.

Regardless, they decided to take shifts at the blacksmith's place, watching Riyosuke work. If they didn't, he'd probably never finish. They couldn't work until Moguzo's weapon was done.

“Okay! I get it! I get it already! I just have to do it, right? I'll do it! You don't have to tell me! I always planned to...!”

Riyosuke finally got to work. Haruhiro couldn't help but think, *What're you snapping at us for?* But once Riyosuke started, he didn't get distracted. He had three apprentices. It was satisfying to watch the four of them work in the smithy. The master swung his hammer like a man possessed.

“It's not that our master is slow,” one of the younger apprentices quietly explained, “It just takes him a while to get started. I guess you could say it's because he's an artist. His hands won't move until he finds his inspiration. But—and I know it's weird for me, his apprentice, to be the one saying this—he does solid work.”

Haruhiro didn't know what the world of the craftsmen was like, but there were a lot of different types of volunteer soldiers. Maybe craftsmen were the same.

Ultimately, they didn't have to wait until the 6:00 pm bell chimed. Moguzo's weapon was done almost an hour in advance. Surprisingly, it didn't look much different from when Death Spots had been using it. And yet, it had been downsized properly.

“There!” Riyosuke said with the smuggest look as he offered the blade to Moguzo, “It’s quality work! Try holding it!”

“...Okay.” Moguzo grabbed the handle of his new weapon. In that moment, “Whuh?!” his expression changed. “Wh-What is this...?! It’s heavy, but light?! Is this possible...?!”



“What’d you say?! Moguzo, hand it here!” Ranta snatched the greatsword from Moguzo—but, “Gwuh?!” he immediately dropped it.

“Th-This is beyond heavy! There’s no way you can lug this thing around, right...?!”

Ranta didn’t have Moguzo’s size or strength. It seemed like that was why, but as Riyosuke smugly explained, there was more to it than just that.

“How easy a weapon is to use is almost entirely dependent on the center of gravity being in the appropriate place. That center of gravity is a property of the weapon, but we each feel it differently! Basically, for this greatsword, I’ve made it so the center of gravity will be just right when he uses it! Anyone else will have a hell of a time with it! Meanwhile, it will feel light to him, despite its weight! How’s that...?!”

Haruhiro was sincerely impressed, and Moguzo was thrilled with it, too. Shihoru nodded at the explanation, while, “Fweh...” Yume didn’t really seem to get it, but Ranta wanted Riyosuke to make him a weapon, too.

“Ha ha ha! Now, now, before that, I’ll be taking my payment. This is a business, after all.”

When Riyosuke gave him a mischievous wink, Moguzo went, “Oh, right!” and was about to give him the money when—Merry stopped him.

“Hold on. About that.”

“...Y-Yes?” Riyosuke seemed to deflate at once. He was pretty scared of Merry.

“After you plainly broke the deadline, you wouldn’t dare ask for the 40 silver you originally quoted us, would you?”

“...C-Can’t I?”

“Think for yourself.”

“...I can’t... right? Of course not. That makes sense... No. I thought that might be the case myself. Ha ha ha... Okay, 38...”

“Huuuh?”

“37—”

“Really think about this.”

“30... silver.”

“Maybe that’s okay? If that’s what you really think it should be.”

“...Make it 25 silver, please.”

And so, Moguzo got Death Spots’ sword, with a discount thanks to Merry. Obviously, that slightly threatening exchange was an act Merry was putting on for Moguzo’s benefit. Haruhiro knew that. It was still a bit scary, but if she hadn’t taken it that far, it wouldn’t have had any effect. She must have done her best to sound legitimately threatening.

Moguzo said he’d treat everyone to an expensive dinner, so they all gathered in the village of stalls near the craftsmen’s town.

“Whew! Man, I’ve gotta hand it to you, Merry! I’ve never seen someone that scared before. It was hilarious!”

“Ranta, man...”

Haruhiro was going to tell him off, but Merry laughed a little.

“That was a smarter negotiation than you could have pulled off, right?”

“Heh. I’m the type to push, and push, and push. I’m not aiming for ‘smart’ to begin with. It’s the results that matter in the end.”

Merry didn’t seem all that bothered about it anymore. Did that mean she’d gotten over it? Maybe opening up about her feelings to them had made it easier on her. If so, that made him happy, as her comrade.

“Yume, I was thinking...” Shihoru whispered to Yume, “About the lodging house. Maybe it’s fine. For now...”

“Hmm. Yeah. Well, there’s no need to go rushin’ things.”

She’s not saying that because Merry was scary—right...?

They were whispering pretty quietly, but it seemed Ranta overheard them. He smirked, mumbling something to himself. *I haven’t gotten a good look yet, or something like that.*

“...Haven’t gotten a good look yet?”

“Huh?”

His eyes met with Ranta’s.

I haven’t gotten a good look. Yet. At what?

“Oh...” As Haruhiro realized, Ranta looked away. “...Man. It’s not about memories, or being lonely—it’s about *that*...?”

Ranta suddenly threw his arms around Haruhiro and Moguzo’s shoulders, and let out a degenerate laugh.

“It means the fun’s gonna keep on going. Don’t make me say it. It’s embarrassing.”

“...You’re embarrassing.”

“Y-Yeah...”

appendix #2

Howling Beneath the Moon,

I am a Wolf

**Grimgar of
Fantasy and Ash**

Level. Fourteen Plus Plus

LOW

1. On the Beach

On some remote beach, there were two women staring each other down.

The sun high in the sky blazed down on them with murderous intent.

It was sweltering.

No, scorching.

As the intense, merciless sunlight beat down on the hot beach, the two women stood barefoot. In fact, they weren't even wearing any clothes, but they weren't buck naked, either.

They were half naked. Each had coarse cloth wrapped around their chest and waist. No, not coarse cloth. What they had was a non-woven fabric, made by boiling bark and pounding it. This was not woven from the hair of a beast, or the stems and leaves of a plant, so it could not be called cloth.

Both had fairly long hair. One of them had hers braided, while the other had hers tied off to the left and right. The strings they used to tie their hair were also made from twined bark.

There was an inner glow in their eyes as they crouched low, bending their knees, and tilted their upper bodies forward. They shook their arms, moved one hand or the other forward, then immediately pulled it back, shifting their weight between their feet. It seemed they were each watching to see the other's reactions.

They were drenched with sweat. Beads of sweat that looked more like beads of glass appeared and then ran off their suntanned skin, dripping from their jaws and arms without ever stopping.

There was no forewarning. Suddenly, the woman with braids attacked the woman with bundled hair.

The braided woman was aiming to grab the bundled woman from a low posture, and knock her over quickly. The sand should have held her feet at least a little and slowed her motions, but the braided woman's tackle came lightning fast. It was a devilish tackle. No, this was a devil tackle. The bundled woman

was shocked, gulping. Her eyes bulged, and all she could do was get devil tackled.

Or so it looked, but the bundled woman didn't just go, *Whoa, she's fast!* She grinned. And that wasn't all. She actually said, "Grin!"

The thought, *Hrm, this could be bad*, crossed the braided woman's mind as she charged in. The bundled woman seized her by the head, for she had accurately predicted the timing of the attack based on the braided woman's actions. Thanks to that, it was easy for her to push the braided woman's head down, and vault over her.

The bundled woman did a little jump, and the braided woman was forced to grit her teeth as her momentum made her pitch forward. That alone made the braided woman feel she'd been bested, but the bundled woman was greedy. *I'll be having this, too*, she seemed to say as she swung her left leg backwards.

The bundled woman was airborne, and the braided woman was falling forward. Their backs were facing one another.

The bundled woman's left foot was closing in on the braided woman's back. Those five toes spread wide, like they were fingers. If this was rock, paper, scissors, then she was throwing paper. No, actually, this was the ideal paper made real. No paper more perfect than this could ever be thrown.

Her big toe touched the braided woman's back.

To describe that a bit more precisely, it touched between her left and right shoulders. There—that was where she had tied her chest wrap. Once her big toe touched the knot, it was followed by her index toe.

Not just her big toe, her index toe, too? Oh, no, this isn't lookin' good.

The braided woman let out a strange cry of, "Mobah!" and twisted away. Sadly, it was too late. With heartless cruelty, the bundled woman grasped the knot of her chest wrap with her big and index toes.

"No-chah!"

The bundled woman let out a battle cry, and spun like a whirlwind.

With that, the chest wrap came undone.

The braided woman's face nearly plunged into the scorching sand, but just before it did, "Ngh, nah!" she used both hands to prop herself up, preventing that pathetic conclusion. If she tried to tell you, *But, y'know, really, it wasn't frustratin' at all*, she'd just be lying. Not only had she been used as a hurdle, her breasts had been exposed, and now she looked like she was trying to do push-ups for some reason.

Ohhh, what the heck?! Why's this happenin'?!

Turning her indignation into explosive power, the braided woman cried, "Kwomuh!" and launched into the air using the strength of her arms alone.

The bundled woman giggled, grinning as she raised her left foot a little.

The chest wrap that was now dangling from the toes of that foot swayed back and forth.

"Your boooooobs are showing, Yumeryun. Hehehehheh..."

"Grrrr..."

Yume, AKA Yumeryun, gritted her teeth so hard her suntanned face turned a dark red. She wasn't embarrassed about having her breasts exposed or anything. That didn't matter to her one bit. The real shock was that the tackle she had gone all-in on had been completely ineffective. But still, Yume nodded. "...Not yet," she muttered.

Whew, she exhaled. She stood up straight, taking a defensive posture with one foot forward, one foot behind, and loosened up her body.

"It's not over yet, Momo-san. It's still only 2-1, y'know?"

"Yeah."

Momohina, AKA Momo-san, dropped the chest wrap she had been holding in her toes, and lowered her left foot to the beach.

"That's the way to be, Yumeryun."

The way she was standing was inscrutable. It looked like there should be any number of openings to attack, but if you actually attacked, she'd easily dodge out of the way. In Yume's estimation, Momohina was slimy. She was slippery, smooth, and soft. But at the same time, when she needed to, *crack, pow*, she

could become hard. She'd let loose explosively, *boom, bam, kaboom*, sometimes, too.

Momohina could do whatever she wanted, as fast or as slow as she wanted, so it was hard to approach her. What could be done about that? When Yume asked herself that question, "Hmm, maybe kinda like that," was the kind of answer she came back with. It couldn't be put into words. This was one of those "Don't think. Feel!" things. If she tried to put the essence of the thing into words, she would lose it. She had to feel it. Feel. The example was right in front of her.

Yume imagined Momohina. Became Momohina. Yume was Momohina. Momo-san.

Yume = Momo-san.

She moved her feet. Yume just walked down the beach. Momohina was on the other side.

The first to seize the other's chest and waist wraps won. That was the rule in this match. But that was no real problem. Her feet felt the softness and heat of the sand. She heard the waves. The wind blew in from the south, but not strong enough to make her long hair blow in it.

Momohina smiled, keeping her eyes focused on Yume. Yume was not smiling. She looked at Momohina, neither smiling nor laughing. They were each looking at different things, but perhaps they were essentially the same.

Yume was connected to Momohina. Not physically, but there was a link. Right now, if you pinched Momohina's right cheek, Yume would feel the pain in her own.

The distance between the two narrowed.

It was about time.

Yume, and also Momohina, reached out with her right hand slightly open. The backs of their hands touched. Almost like a handshake. That was the signal.

Momohina thrust out her left hand. Yume's right hand pushed Momohina's left arm to the outside, and Momohina's right hand closed in on Yume's jaw.

Yume knocked it away with her left hand.

Momohina tried to chop the side of Yume's neck with her left hand. Yume diverted that chop up and away diagonally using her left elbow. Momohina launched a sweeping kick at Yume's left knee using her right leg. Yume immediately pulled her left leg back, and waited for Momohina's right leg to go by.

They were at close range. Nearly touching. Their arms and legs intertwined as they collided. They brushed past. They grazed one another. There was no need for them to clench their fist except at the moment of impact. There were times they could use their fingers like they were claws, too. They could go for a grab. And elbowing was, of course, valid, too. Kicks from the knee, kicks using the tip of the foot or the heel, stomps, and more. There were many ways to do it. Unlimited ways. That was why if she kept thinking, *If she does this, I do this*, and trying to plan it all out, she couldn't respond. Her body would move on its own. That's what all this training had been for.

Yume pushed hard on Momohina's left shoulder with her right hand. She went for Momohina's chest wrap with her left hand, but Momohina stopped her with her right hand.

Yume tried to circle around behind Momohina from the right. In order to avoid that, Momohina spun her body in the opposite direction.

Yume stopped going right, and went left instead. Or she made it look like she was, then stopped still for a moment.

That created a gap.

Yume took a deep breath. The fact was, she had hardly been breathing as she moved. Inhaling, in particular, had been impossible. That was the same for Momohina. Yume had just taken a pause to breathe, but Momohina had not.

Yume accelerated. She had breathed, so she could move. Fast. With more power. Yume launched a spinning kick to the right. Momohina effortlessly blocked it with her left arm and leg. Yume didn't pull her right leg back. She launched a high spinning kick, then middle, and middle again. High, middle, high, low, low. She changed up her spinning kicks. Yume's sense of balance, her unwavering axis, was something Momohina had complimented before. Yume

was a little bigger, and at this range, where their hands couldn't reach, she could put the pressure on Momohina.

But she couldn't break through Momohina's guard. Even with a mix of spinning kicks, forward kicks, backward kicks, and side kicks, using variations and combos, none of it worked. A flying kick would leave her too open. A knee kick would force her into Momohina's effective range, which would be bad.

The more she attacked, the fewer cards she had left to play. Like she was attacking to eliminate her options one by one. Each time she attacked, Yume was pushed further into a corner.

She's strong.

Yume couldn't help but be impressed all over again. Momohina had been strong to begin with, but joining Yume in training on this island had made her even stronger. Momohina was running way ahead of where Yume was. Even when Yume chased with all her might, Momohina's back kept pulling farther away.

"Koh!"

Yume brought her right leg up with such momentum it looked like she might bend over backwards. If Momohina hadn't leaned back herself, Yume's toes would have likely impacted Momohina's jaw.

She knew Momohina would dodge. That's why Yume didn't just bend over backward, she did a somersault. There was a hunter skill called Weasel Somersault. Yume used that. Not once. Twice in a row, to get away from Momohina.

Finally, she could breathe. Not well, though. Her throat and her lungs hurt like they were on fire. Her heart was pounding like mad. The amount she was sweating was unreal.

"You've gotten good, Yumeryun."

Momohina was sweating, too. But not to the point that she could probably drown in her own sweat like Yume. Despite the heat, the look on her face was cool.

“When we first came to the island, you were absoootutely no match for me. Urkh. Not absotutely. It’s absolutely, huh?”

Momohina put her hands on her hips and chuckled to herself. This was all no big deal to her.

Momohina was never one to worry. She was always magnanimous and easy-going.

When she was with Momohina, she could almost forget that this was a desert isle. Yume was able to stay sane on this island because Momohina was here. If Momohina weren’t around, she couldn’t have gotten stronger. Momohina taught and trained Yume. If Yume didn’t want to be weak, she just had to get strong. She could get stronger. Momohina made her believe that.

Yume stretched her back, spread her feet to shoulder width, and let her arms hang limply.

“Animal Fist... Bear!”

“Okay, then I’ll go with...”

Momohina brought her left leg forward, placing her right leg behind her. There was a distance of about two fists between her feet. She bent her knees, lowering her center of gravity. She leaned forward, hunched her back, and put her hands down on the beach.

“Animal Fist... Dog!”

Momohina’s hair stood on end. Grrrr! There was a low growl in the back of her throat.

Yume roared. Grawwwwr! She was a total bear now.

The dog ran at the bear. The bear swung her arms furiously to keep the dog at bay. The dog jumped around, dodging the bear’s arms and aiming to tear her throat out.

The bear and the dog tussled. The dog was on top sometimes, the bear others.

They broke up. The dog ran; the bear gave chase. The dog turned, and the bear fled. Eventually the bear went on the counterattack, and the dog tried to

put distance between them.

“Animal Fist... Snake!”

The bear’s arms moved agilely, like snakes. Not just her arms; the bear’s, no, Yume’s whole body had become that of a snake. She assaulted the dog with snake-like hands.

“Animal Fist... Squirrel!”

Suddenly the dog, no, Momohina became a squirrel. Squirrels were small and speedy. She moved like a spinning windmill, avoiding all of the snake’s attacks.

“Fine then! Animal Fist... Scorpion!”

“I’ll go with Animal Fist... Frog!”

“Animal Fist... Bee!”

“Animal Fist... Butterfly!”

“Butterfly?!”

“I got it wrong! Jellyfish!”

“Jellyfish?!”

“No, Octopus!”

“Hippo!”

“Rhino!”

“Parrot!”

“Parrot?! Elephant!”

“C-Crocodile!”

“Egg!”

“Egg?!”

“Meow! Animal Fist, Cat!”

“Then Fly!”

“Fungh!”

“Munah!”

“Dohh!”

“Undakatsuohhh...!”

The thoughts faded from her head one after another. She had no room for extraneous thoughts. Her body was exhausted, of course. It was fair to say she was extremely fatigued. Even so, she never fully stopped. Somehow, as she blocked Momohina’s attacks, or desperately avoided them, her strength would suddenly return to her. Then she’d immediately strike back. If she didn’t push when she could, she’d always be on the receiving end.

There’s a flow in a battle. You read it. Ride its currents. Yume really wanted to master riding them. But it was still too much for her. Yume couldn’t create a current against an opponent like Momohina.

She could ride an existing current, and try to bring things a little more in her favor. It wasn’t easy. Momohina was always calmly observing Yume. Seeing, hearing, smelling, and sensing. To grasp the whole of her opponent, but also the fine details. Not in small bits, but continuously, carefully. With an all-enveloping understanding.

In her time training with Momohina, Yume had at least found the first clues to that technique. Thanks to that, now she could ride the current too.

At some point, the sun had begun to set.

After countless exchanges of attack and defense, Yume caught the knot on Momohina’s chest wrap with the big toe of her left foot.

Yume used her big toe and index toe to skillfully undo the knot of her chest wrap.

At the same time, Momohina’s left hand was tearing at Yume’s waist wrap.

The first to take the chest or waist wrap from the other would be victorious.

“Hee! Looks like I win!”

“Unnyoh! Yume lost!”

The setting sun stained the waterside orange. There was no resisting the

shadows that expanded their territory with every moment that passed. The world they had invaded shamelessly donned the colors of night.

They were both spreadeagled on the beach.

Yume was buck naked. Only Momohina's lower half was covered by her waist wrap. But what did it matter? They were the only ones on this island anyway. Until they drifted here, it had been completely uninhabited.



“We sure trained a lot today, huh? Good work, Yumeryun.”

“There’s still a long way to go. No matter how many times we fight, Yume never ends up feelin’ like she coulda won.”

“Oh, yeah? I dunno about thaaaat. The race may be tighter than you think.”

“Hmm. Tight, huh?”

“Yumeryun, you’ve got one bouncy buddlywut.”

“Is a buddlywut a butt?”

“It suuure is. Buddly-uddly-wut-wut-wut.”

“You’ve got a bouncy butt, too, Momo-san.”

“Nahhhh. My buddlywut’s got nothing on yours, Yumeryun.”

“Wait, are you complimentin’ Yume?”

“Yes, yes, I am. Because bouncy butts are the best, okay?”

“Oh, yeah?”

Right after Yume said that, there was a loud rumble.

Yume rubbed her tummy. This time, it rumbled even louder.

“...Oh. Yume’s hungry!”

“Okay!”

Momohina sprang up like nothing held her down. Even after all that training, she could move lightly. It was incredible. She was some kind of monster.

Yume slowly sat up. To be honest, she wished she could get up quickly, but there were spots where she was hurting.

Gotta keep workin’ at it.

But when she first came to the island, Yume would have been unable to so much as move at this point.

“Let’s go look for food!”

Momohina was perfectly fine going straight into the forest after training until twilight, and Yume had gotten to the point where, somehow, she could manage

to keep up with her. Yume was making steady progress.

2. Strength Will Make me Strong

The *Mantis-go* set sail from the K&K Pirate Company's main base in the port city of Roronea, in the Emerald Archipelago, and set a course toward the east.

Broadly, they headed east, and then further east, across what was called the Blue Sea, or the Blue Ocean. If they followed the Coral Archipelago all the way eastward, the west coast of the Red Continent would come into view.

The Red Continent was inhabited by the tailed people, the long-armed people, the tall-eared people, the three-eyed people, the many-eyed people, the iron-headed people, the furry people, the thorny-skinned people, the feather-boned people, the shadowless people, the ball-shaped people, and more. There were a lot of countries, and a large number of kings.

It was a long way from the Emerald Archipelago to the Coral Archipelago. It was even further from there to the Red Continent, but when a flotilla from the Kingdom of Arabakia discovered the Coral Archipelago some two hundred years ago, the islands were already inhabited, and there were ports there. The many-eyed people of the Red Continent had reached the Coral Archipelago first.

There was only one great landmass in the world that people called Grimgar. That used to be common sense. It was also incredibly wrong.

The people who learned of the existence of the Red Continent came to refer to this side of the Blue Sea as Grimgar. The histories of Grimgar and the Red Continent began to change with the Coral Archipelago as a relay point between them. Before they were destroyed, the kingdoms of Arabakia and Ishmal opened relations with multiple countries on the Red Continent, and traded with them.

The Red Continent wasn't a legend, or a fiction, or a dream, or an illusion.

That said, the Red Continent was a long way away, and the open sea was full of threats and dangers. On the ocean, where there was nowhere to take shelter, even the all-too-common storms could sometimes prove lethal. Without a talented and experienced captain and navigator, as well as the rest of

the crew, it would be impossible to make it to the Coral Archipelago, let alone the Red Continent. Even with ships that had been to the Red Continent many times, when it came time for them to sink, sink they would.

Yume had been told repeatedly that there was no guarantee of her safety, and she understood that. But had she really been ready for anything to happen? Maybe she just hadn't thought about it that much. As for Momohina, and the crew of the *Mantis-go* who served under Ginzy, they acted like they were just going out on another voyage like usual. No sign of concern. If anything, Yume was excited. She never had an inkling that anything bad was about to happen.

"It's been two years now, huh...?"

Yume was using the stick that she used to stir the fire to draw swirls in the sand. She had meant to write numbers, but for some reason it came out as swirls.

They hunted until midnight, then brought the black flying squirrels, big-eyed tanuki, and walking bird-dragon they had caught back to the beach. Yume butchered them there, and Momohina got the fire started. They had already eaten the parts of the black flying squirrels and big-eyed tanuki that were edible once cooked. They had only prepared the walking bird-dragon to cook, but they were both more or less full, so they could leave it at that.

Momohina was lying on her back. Yume looked over, thinking she must be asleep already because she was so quiet, but her eyes were open.

Yume drew even more swirls with her stick.

"Has it been two years? Is Yume wrong about that, maybe? She wasn't countin' properly back when we'd just got here."

"Sounds about right," Momohina said vaguely.

The *Mantis-go* had been caught in a big storm on the way to the Coral Archipelago. Yume didn't know much about the sea, but they apparently had the misfortune of running into a typhoon, or a cyclone, or a hurricane, or something, but they didn't usually form at that time of year. It wasn't something they could turn and run away from, so they had to weather the

storm until they came out the other side. Inside the *Mantis-go*, they worked hard, preparing to do just that. Moving cargo around, fixing it in place—Yume helped with anything that she could. If she didn't keep busy, it made her feel hopelessly uneasy.

"That storm. Y'know, it feels like it was yesterday."

"I'd already forgotten allllll about it. Ho, ho, ho."

Unlike Momohina, who was letting out an odd laugh, Yume couldn't possibly forget. The wind picked up rapidly, the rain hammered the *Mantis-go*, and she swayed back and forth. No, this wasn't a swaying, it was more like she was flipped over, and spun around.

At the time, there was only a skeleton crew up top. Yume, of course, was inside the ship. Despite that, the floor was all wet. They were taking on water, and Yume was soaked. People yelled about how this was broken, and that was broken. How this was bad, or crazy. It was hard to stay calm, and if she just sat there she felt like she was going to cry. She remembered begging someone to please, just let her do *something*. She didn't remember who that was, though. Yume ran to the hold on their orders, tripped and hit her head, and helped carry planks of wood. She held them in place while others nailed them to the wall, too.

"We're screwed, we're screwed," she heard someone shouting.

"We're gonna sink like this," someone else said clearly.

The vast majority of the crew were working hard to prevent that, but she saw one who had cracked, crying, "I give up! I give up! It's too late!"

There was one who was drinking, and got punched by his shipmate for it. He shouted, "Lay off! It's the end of the road for us! You think I can take this without drinking?!" and violently tried to take his booze back.

Why did Yume go up on deck again? She didn't remember. There were a number of crew members heading up there, saying something about the mast looking ready to snap, or that they had to do something about something, and they needed people. There was no reason that Yume absolutely had to go with them. She was terrified enough as it was, so she couldn't explain what might

have possessed her to go up on deck where it could only be ridiculously worse.

However, thinking about it now, she wasn't ready to wait and become flotsam, so she must have wanted to do anything she could. Basically, Yume didn't want to die. She was struggling against it.

Momohina apparently tried to stop her along the way, but she didn't notice. The moment she got on deck, the rain started pounding her sideways. Or maybe the *Mantis-go* was tilted just right, and a wave had been coming in from the side. What happened to the crew who made it up on deck before her? She couldn't imagine. Yume was washed helplessly away by that rain or wave. The next thing she knew, she was in the sea, and Momohina was holding her tight.

Momohina said she had told her not to go, but she wasn't listening, so she came after her. Then they'd been swallowed by the sea together.

"Y'know, Momo-san, if you weren't there, Yume, she'd deeeefinitely have drowned right away. Right?"

There was no response. Just the soft breathing of a sleeper. Momohina's eyes were closed. It looked like she was deep asleep.

Yume chuckled, laying her branch down, and lying down herself.

She could see the stardust scattered across the jet-black sky so clearly that it was blinding. Yume often thought to herself that the stars in the sky on this island looked tasty. That big, yellow star would be sweet, and the pale one next to it would be sour. She was sure they all had their own flavor.

Yume fell asleep, imagining putting the stars in her mouth and thinking about how they would taste, without ever noticing when she had closed her eyes.

When she awoke, it was pretty bright out. Certainly not before dawn. It was definitely morning. The campfire had gone out.

Yume sat up. Momohina was by the shore, spinning her arms in circles, stretching her knees, and doing other warmup exercises.

"Good mornin', Momo-san."

"Ohhh. Good morniiiiing."

Momohina smiled at Yume while moving her body. Yume smiled, too.

There were no rules about when they slept, when they woke up, what they did when they got up, or anything like that. There was no way to know what time it was now, and the weather was temperamental. There were times when they could find something to eat, and times when they just couldn't seem to. Even if they did set up a proper schedule, it was unlikely things would go according to it anyway. When they got to training, they'd focus on it until they were done, but outside of that they generally took it easy. No, even when it came to training, they'd call it off if the weather got too, too bad, and if they spotted an animal they wouldn't want to let get away, they'd switch over to hunting instead.

This island was surrounded by the sea, obviously. The deep blue sea stretched out beyond the horizon, as if it went on forever.

If they were to make one circuit of the coast, it was a 60-kilometer walk. The island was roughly heart-shaped, and after desperately attempting to calculate the area of it, Yume and Momohina had concluded it had to be about 70 square kilometers.

There was an active volcano in the eastern part of the island, and thin trails of smoke occasionally rose from the mouth of it. The western part was more or less flat.

With the exception of smaller streams, the island had six rivers, plus their tributaries. The majority was covered in dense jungle, while the seaside was mostly windswept coasts and sheer cliffs. There was a sandy beach on the west bank of the area in the center of the southern side where there was an indentation, and the two of them had based themselves there.

Despite being caught in that fearsome storm, they had fortunately found a board to cling to, and survived. They drifted for three days and three nights, no, five days, or maybe it was six? Whatever the case, they drifted for a long time before finally washing up on this desert isle. It was probably close to a miracle. No, not close to a miracle, it was fair to say that it was an absolute miracle.

Yume had gone up on deck because she didn't want to die, nearly died for her foolishness, and was now enjoying the island life after lucking out and surviving. It wasn't all fun, but if she accepted all the hardship, the sadness, the loneliness,

and everything else, she figured she could say she was enjoying her days here.

There are things in this world you just can't do anything about. You can whine and throw a tantrum, but what can't be changed can't be changed. That's just how it is.

Even knowing that, there were times, especially on a clear day like today, when she couldn't help but stare at the distant sea. Could you blame her, really? In the same way that she couldn't help but smile when she ate something tasty, there was no stopping the tears that came when she thought of the friends she had been separated from. There was no need to stop them. She didn't want to be disappointed, so it was better not to get her hopes up. It only made her think of what lay beyond, so it was better not to look out to sea. Even as she thought that, she still got her hopes up, and couldn't help but look.

"...Oh." Yume blinked.

She stood up and walked towards the shore. Yume wasn't watching her step at all. She stared exclusively at the sea.

"Fwuh?" Momohina let out that confused sound.

The waves came in. Yume kept walking despite them. In no time, the sea was up to her knees.

Yume narrowed her eyes. Her visual acuity was one thing Momohina couldn't beat her at.

She saw something. It looked like a dot. There was something floating in the sea. She couldn't make out the shape of it. So all she could say was that it was *something*. At first, she thought she was imagining it. While she was out at sea, and for some time after washing up on this island, she had kept hearing and seeing things. But it didn't happen all that often lately. That wasn't what this was. It didn't look like an illusion.

"Hey, Momo-san."

"What is it, Yumeryunryun?"

"Yume, she thinks she can see somethin' in the distance. What do you think it is?"

Momohina walked over next to Yume.

“Hrmm, it’s pretty tiny. I’m not really sure. But I do see something.”

“You can see it, right?”

“You think it’s a big tree, maybe?”

Momohina said that, then laughed. It seemed forced, like she was trying to trick herself. It wasn’t like Momohina to laugh like that. Momohina herself realized that, and seemed a little embarrassed.

“Probably... and this’s just a probably, but... Yume, she doesn’t think that’s a tree.”

“Then what do you suppose it is, Yumeryun?”

“A sh—” Yume started to say, then grasped her throat. Suddenly, the word wouldn’t come out. She could exhale, but she couldn’t produce a voice. What could possibly be going on?

“What’s wrong?”

Momohina rubbed her back. Yume couldn’t respond. She just groaned as she looked at the object out at sea. What had she thought it was? Sh, sh... Sh? The word that represented that object just wouldn’t come to mind.

But still, she thought it must be that thing.

You know the one.

As Momohina was rubbing Yume’s back with the palm of her hand, she suddenly said, “You think it’s a ship?”

“That’s it!”

“Mwuh?!”

“That! That’s the word! Ship! It’s a ship! That thing out there, Yume was thinkin’ it’s a ship! Just probably, though!”

As she rambled on like the dam holding her words back had burst, she remembered that she’d had a dream just like this before. Just as she was thinking, *Hooray! It’s a ship! A ship’s come! Thank goodness! Now we can go home!* she woke up and realized, *Oh, no, it wasn’t real, it was a dream,* and got

disappointed.

“Hold on, hold on, Yumeryun! Clam town! No, that’s not it, I mean calm down!”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right. We’ve gotta calm down. If we get excited, all sorts of crazy things could happen. Clam town, clam town... No, that’s not it, huh? Lamp gown...”

“You haven’t calmed down at all, huh? Why don’t we swim for now?”

“What the heck?”

“Nyuhahah! Why don’t you go for a swiiiiim?”

“Yume’s not goin’ swimmin’. Not now, y’know?”

“You really think it’s a ship?”

“It’s still hard to see. Not clearly, at least...”

Yume and Momohina decided to wait for the moment. It was scorching out. The sun gradually rose, and it got hot. Without saying anything more, the two of them both started walking out to sea. Was the object out there actually getting closer? If it got any smaller, it would soon disappear. But it wasn’t getting any bigger, either. Could it have stopped?

They were getting far enough out into the water that soon their feet wouldn’t touch the bottom. Momohina started swimming.

“Momo-san, are you plannin’ on goin’ all the way out there?”

“I’m not gonna. That’s obviously not possible. I’m just going for a liiiittle swim. Not like there’s anything better to do.”

Yume thought about swimming for a moment, too, but couldn’t get in the mood for it.

Even if that thing was a ship, they might leave without ever coming ashore at the island. If that happened, it felt like no ship would ever come again. That ship was their last hope. It wasn’t that Yume had any solid reason to believe this. She couldn’t even decide if it was a ship or not to begin with.

It looked like a ship with white sails, but it could have been something else

that was just shaped similarly.

What happened to the *Mantis-go* in the end? Yume had spent a lot of time thinking about that. In her worst imaginings, they sunk, and the odds of that being what happened were not small. It had been an incredible storm, and the *Mantis-go* was already damaged when Yume was thrown overboard.

“What do you think?” she had once asked Momohina.

“I dunno,” was the answer. “I’m not a woman of the sea, you know? I mean, I was a captain, but I never did aaaany of the work.”

“Whaaaat?! You didn’t?”

Momohina, like Yume, had just woken up in Grimgar one day. There was a boy named Kisaragi and a girl named Ichika with her, and also like Yume, none of them remembered anything but their names.

Momohina had Kisaragi and Ichika, and Yume had her comrades. Why did she go and break up with them? Yume had agonized over that one a lot, too. If she were able to turn back time and redo things, what would Yume have done? Wouldn’t she have gotten aboard the same ship as Haruhiro and the rest, and gone to the free city of Vele?

The ship didn’t seem to be getting closer. It just looked like a ship, and she couldn’t say definitively that it was one just yet, but Yume was starting to believe it. That thing had to be a ship.

In the end, that just meant she wanted to believe. Yume had learned that in her time on the island. It probably wasn’t just Yume. Most people didn’t believe in things because they were believable, they believed what they wanted to believe.

For a time, Yume had absolutely believed help would come.

Another time, she had believed help would never come, and they would be on this island until they died.

She had no reason to believe either.

When she couldn’t go on without believing help would come, she had believed it would. Once it became easier to believe it wouldn’t, she believed

that.

The reason that the object that was floating in the sea at some undetermined distance looked like a ship to her now was because she wanted to believe it was a ship. Yume was seeing what she wanted to see.

Yume decided to swim like Momohina. As she did the breaststroke, taking it as easily as she could, the thoughts, *That's a ship. Help has finally come*, and, *That can't be a ship. Help isn't coming*, swirled around and around inside her head.

Yume wanted to be stronger. But that wasn't a matter of building muscle or stamina, improving her technique, learning new moves, and raising her combat potential. Those things were important, too, but she couldn't become truly strong that way.

Yume wanted an unwavering self. One that wouldn't lean this way, and then that way, based on what was happening at the moment.

Or one that, even if she did lean, would soon snap back, and no matter how intensely she wavered, would not stay that way.

"Momo-saaaan."

"Whaaaat?"

"...Momo-saaaan."

"I said, what?"

"It's a ship."

"Hrmm?"

"That there, that's gotta be a ship."

Yume stopped swimming, and started treading water.

The white sails, the body of the ship, the masts—she could see all of it.

"It's a ship. We can go home. We can go hooome..."

3. Bach and Rose

The ship dropped anchor in the offing and sent out a dinghy. There were five aboard the little boat, and all of them had three eyes. They were three-eyed people from the Red Continent.

If it weren't for the third eye on their foreheads, they'd have looked just as human as Yume or Momohina. They had messy red hair, skin like bronze, perhaps due to tanning, and all five appeared to be male.

Yume and Momohina had come out to the beach to greet these three-eyed people, but the moment the men saw them, they started shouting and swinging their white blades around as they came in to attack. Yume was a bit surprised, but Momohina seemed amused, actually.

"Delm, hel, en! Balk! Zel, arve! Blast, boom!"

The Blast spell that Momohina suddenly fired off didn't hurt the three-eyed people. It just sent the sea water, and the sand underneath it, flying into the air.

That was intentional, of course. Momohina rarely used magic. The super-physical mage, Momohina, would sometimes resort to violence, but she was fundamentally a warrior of freedom who loved peace. Besides, the fact of the matter was, Yume and Momohina weren't getting out of here without hitching a ride on that ship, so they couldn't afford to kill the crew even if they were attacking them.

"Yumeryun! Begin the suppression immeeeeediately! Full speed ahead!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The two of them quickly stripped the panicked three-eyed people of their weapons, and after a few punches and kicks to rob them of the will to resist, they tried to negotiate. The problem was, their words didn't work.

"Ugyaga gukyago zukyazukya."

"...Hey, Momo-san, do you have any idea what he's sayin'?"

"Noooooot a clue! Nuh-uh! I dunno!"

If they didn't understand their language, there was little that could be done about that. However, they couldn't just give up. Using pantomime, they might have managed to convey that they had washed up on a desert island, and were

awaiting rescue. It was also possible they understood Yume and Momohina's wish to board their ship, and be taken to the Coral Archipelago, the Red Continent, or basically anywhere else. That's what Yume wanted to think.

Two of the five three-eyed people remained on the island, and Momohina, Yume, and the remaining three men boarded the dinghy, and returned to the mothership. That dinghy might have fit seven, if they really pushed it, but for whatever reason, this was just the way things worked out.

"Momo-san. Why do you think those two stayed on the island?"

"Hmm. I dunno? Justin Case, maybe?"

"Who's that?"

"I don't know, either! Nwahahahaha!"

Momohina and Yume were able to board the ship smoothly. In addition to the three-eyed men, the crew was made up of many-eyed people, who had insect-like eyes taking up half their face; long-armed people, who had arms so long they nearly touched the ground; and thorn-skinned people, who looked like walking sea urchins, but the captain was a tall-eared person, with long, rabbit-like ears.

Despite his tall ears, the captain had a face reminiscent of a vicious dog. And yet he didn't seem particularly overbearing. He seemed somewhat understanding, but there was still a language barrier. As they tried to forge ahead despite the lack of comprehension, things got dicey, and finally the captain got mad, and they were unfortunately forced to fight.

"If that's how it's gonna be, that's how it's gonna be! Give 'em hell, Yumeryunryun!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The two of them knocked thirteen members of the crew into the sea. They beat nineteen more senseless, including the tall-eared captain. Four or so were left with broken bones or other serious injuries, but eighteen lost the will to fight and surrendered. Yume, by the way, got off with some light cuts and bruises, while Momohina was completely unscathed.

“Okay, this ship now belongs to the K&K Pirate Company’s K! M! W! Momohina! Full speed ahead!”

“Hey, Momo-san! You’re the best! Woo-hoo!”

“Aww, I’m not that special... Or maybe I am?! Maybe I am!”

Now that they had taken the ship, Momohina and Yume couldn’t navigate her on their own, so they’d have to put the crew to work. Once they rescued the men thrown overboard, and retrieved the two left on the island, they checked with everyone, and they found just one many-eyed guy who could speak a few words of their language. It wasn’t even enough to call it broken, but Yume could sort of talk with him. Using Nyagoh the many-eyed guy as their interpreter, they conveyed their wishes to the tall-eared captain and his crew, and were told they could take them as far as the Coral Archipelago.

“We’re good to go then!! Let’s move, move, moooove!”

And so, the ship set out. Her name was apparently the *Moccha Joe*. Or maybe it was the *Mwachattsa Jowo*. Their interpreter, Nyagoh, attempted to explain it, “Seaaa, floaaat, sobee, mahh...” but he made no sense. It seemed hard to pronounce, so Momohina decided to rename it.

“Hey, Yumeryun. How does the *Useless-go* sound to you?”

“Hrmm. The *Useless-go*, huh?”

“Is it no good?”

“Yeah...”

“The *Useless-go*. I feel like it’s a perfect fit, though.”

“If you’re thinkin’ it’s a perfect fit, Momo-san, maybe *Useless-go* is fine?”

“Okay, the *Useless-go* she is, then!”

With the *Mwachattsa Jowo*, now known as the *Useless-go*, it was smooth sailing from there to the Coral Archipelago.

Not.

Along the way, the tall-eared captain and his men mutinied.

Then there was an armed insurrection by the rest of the crew.

Fortunately, they were able to put them down without fatalities both times, but there were constant fights among the crew, and they nearly sank in bad weather more than once.

When they finally reached port in the Coral Archipelago, a large number of three-eyed people, tall-eared people, many-eyed people, and long-armed people boarded the *Useless-go*. The crew of the *Useless-go*, who had submitted to Momohina up until this point, sided with them.

“Now I’m maaaad. Trying to solve everything with violence is just barbaric. I’m seriously steamed. Buuuut! It’s still a gazillion years too soon for you to beat me!”

“A gazillion?! Wow, that’s super early, huh?!”

They put on an impressive show, absolutely clobbering these apparent pirates one after another.

Yume could do as she pleased, going wherever she wanted, and Momohina was always there to watch her back. No matter how many enemies there were, it honestly didn’t feel like they could lose. Not one bit. There were an awful lot of them, though, and no matter how many they took down, they never seemed to run out.

It was going to be hard to defend the *Useless-go*. Even if they did manage to wipe out the pirates and keep the ship, they couldn’t navigate her by themselves. That made it kind of pointless.

Momohina and Yume were forced to give up and abandon the *Useless-go*, so they went ashore. The island didn’t just have a port, it had a city, too. Apparently it was the base of the pirates who were now chasing them. The locals hurled insults, stones, and garbage at the outsiders, and put boxes and barrels in their way. It was starting to feel like they needed to kill or be killed, but not all the residents were ruffians, so they couldn’t just up and kill people at random. They decided to get out of town for the moment and hide out in the jungle.

They would later find out that this island was on the outer edge of the Coral Archipelago, and the nest of a group of pirates called the Titechitike, which meant, “the idiotic vomit of a devil,” in some language from the Red Continent.

The pirates were out for blood, and hunted all over the island for any sign of the pair. Naturally, Momohina and Yume had no intent of just being hunted down. They beat down any pirates that came their way, took their stuff, and then sent them home because you only live once, and these guys really needed to value their lives more.

“I only kill what I eat!”

That was Momohina’s stance, and Yume agreed entirely. Was it okay to eat the beasts in the forest? Why did she not want to eat people, or creatures that looked like people? These were questions that, naturally, occurred to her. However, there was no need to force herself to kill and eat things she didn’t want to. Even if she didn’t turn the pirates into food, the pirates came carrying stuff that they could eat. Though they were hunting them through the forests, it seemed that the pirates didn’t hunt in the traditional sense of the word, so there was plenty of prey on the island. There were springs here and there, which provided them with all the clean water they could gulp down on the spot, too.

They weren’t having any trouble, but soon enough the Titechitike pirates began leaving food and daily necessities in the forest.

“What’s this...?”

Could this be what it looked like? Had they begun to worship Momohina and Yume as something akin to gods? It was certainly true that, even if Yume might not quite be there yet, Momohina had an air befitting an island goddess about her. Their hair had grown extremely long, they were both totally tanned, and their original clothes had long since been ruined, so they were both wearing boldly “native” outfits, consisting of nothing more than strips of non-woven fabric that were wrapped around their chests and waists, but Yume came off looking like a savage, while Momohina looked like a sage. Maybe they would be better off remaining on this island as the goddesses of the Titechitike?

Not a chance.

They had finally gotten off that deserted island. Yume and Momohina wanted to go home.

If they agitated the pirates any more than this, it would cause trouble, and

Yume felt kind of sorry for them. They tried going around the island to see what they could find, and the neighboring island was pretty close. Yume got Momohina to help her, and they threw together a raft in a jiffy. Sometimes, you've just got to try things. They took the raft out across the strait, and crossed it easily.

"Yumeryun, you're a genius! You're so great! Hey, you're the best in the universe! You ought to be president!"

"Nyeheheheheh. Yume didn't do nothin' that special, though."

"Let's keep going like this! Yeah!"

They crossed from island to island. If they could reach a large, populous island, maybe they could find people from Grimgar, not the Red Continent. That was the hope. There ought to be some. No, they would definitely find them. There was no way they wouldn't!

The largest island of the Coral Archipelago was called Atunai, and there were a number of ports there. At one of those ports, Indelica, Yume and Momohina finally, finally found it.

"Whoa! It's the B-B-B-B-Bachrose!"

Momohina's eyes were practically jumping out of her head.

"Unuh? Back roast...?"

"No! Yumeryun, the B-B-B-Black Toast, er, no, that's not it! Erm, uhh, right! The Bachrose!"

"Ohhh. The Bachrose. That's the one, huh? It's all makin' sense now."

"You know her, too, Yumeryun?"

"Nope, not at all!"

"You doooon't?!"

The two of them ran to the pier where the *Bachrose-go* was moored about as fast as they possibly could.

The *Bachrose-go* was a big, solid-looking, and yet elegant ship. Painted in crimson and green, her body looked like a temple to the god of art, or perhaps

music, while the mast which carried her sails rose high, like a spear trying to pierce the heavens. Her figurehead, shaped like a woman with wings, was sparkling and golden, yet it looked like she might start dancing at any moment.

The person standing near the *Bachrose-go* was not a three-eyed person, or tall-eared person, but a human man who looked like a sailor. Momohina zoomed towards that man.

“Whuh, Momo-san, wai—”

Yume tried to stop her. It was no use. Momohina was fast. There was no way she could have stopped her. Momohina went, “Bam!” and landed a flying kick on the man.

“Eek!”

The man fell into the sea.

Yume crouched at the edge of the pier and looked down at the man thrashing around in the water. He seemed to be a sailor, so he should have been able to swim, but he was panicking.

“...Momo-san.”

“Mokeeee?!”

It seemed Momohina was surprised, too. Why was she screeching like a startled monkey when she was the one who just punted a man into the sea? It was incomprehensible.

“Why’d you go and kick him...?”

“O-Oh! Silly me! I overdid it!”

“Is that what you call overdoin’ it? It looked like plain old assault, y’know?”

“It’s because I know the guy. I couldn’t help it. I was so happy.”

“Ohhh. You know him. Alright. Okay then. ...Normally, you wouldn’t go kickin’ him, though.”

Momohina stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth in embarrassment.

The man was screaming, “S-Save me!” or something like that. If they left him

like that, he might drown. Just as Yume was thinking maybe they should rescue him, “You!” there was a shout from up on the Bachrose’s deck.

“...Hoh?”

As they looked up, a bearded man was looking down at Yume and Momohina from the side of the Bachrose. He had a marvelous mustache, but, *Y’know, it’s not really workin’ for him*, was her first impression.

The man had a black eyepatch over his right eye. The black coat that he just hung over his shoulders instead of wearing properly had silver trim, and was studded with jewels. It looked expensive. The man was relatively small, so it was a little big on him. She couldn’t shake the sense that the clothes were wearing him more than he was wearing the clothes.

The man let out an, “Ah...”

“Ah!” Momohina shouted.

“...Ah?”

Yume looked from the man to Momohina then back again.

The man pulled at his hair with his right hand. Then, exhaling, he said, “If it isn’t Momohina,” with the same sort of mumble you might use when talking about the weather after just waking up in the morning.

“Kisaragicchon...”

Was Momohina disappointed? No, that wasn’t it. No, she looked exhausted. Her voice was awfully quiet, at least by Momohina standards, too. Momohina must have never expected to meet this man here. She was so shocked, not just her strength, but her very soul had left her, too.

“Kisaragicchon,” Momohina repeated again. Maybe she was recovering from her surprise, because she followed that with a, “Yaaaay!” and started bouncing up and down on the spot.

“Yaaaay. It’s Kisaragicchon. Yaaaay.”

“Now, listen, you.”

Kisaragicchon let out a sigh, then grabbed the outside of the ship’s railing with

his left hand. Was that a glove? His right hand was bare, but his left hand was gloved for some reason? But from the look of it, that left hand was larger than his right hand, and apparently made of metal. That meant it wasn't a glove, then.

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop it with the -cchon? Well, whatever, it's fine."

"You're the real deal, the genuine Kisaragicchon, right?"

"Damn straight. Would I tolerate there being another man who's as beyond awesome as I am?"

"No way!"

Momohinaa laughed, then suddenly took off running.

"Romoh?!"

Yume let out a strange cry, but her body reacted and chased after Momohina of its own accord. Momohina was heading for the Bachrose's gangway. Going ridiculously fast. She raced up the ramp with light steps. Leaving Yume behind in no time flat.

When she was finally topside, Momohina clung to Kisaragicchon.

"Wahhh. It's Kisaragicchon. Kisaragicchon! Wahhh. Wahhh. Wahhh..."

"I told you it's me, didn't I?"

"But! But, but, but! It's Kisaragicchon! Ohhh. Wahhh. Ohhh..."

"Damn, you're persistent. Fine, whatever."

With a look of exasperation on his face, Kisaragicchon wrapped both his arms tight around Momohina. She might have been crying.

Yume sniffled, but quickly covered her mouth with her hand. She had very nearly sobbed herself. She felt like sobbing once would be no big deal, but she didn't want to start crying. *Momo-san, I'm so happy for you*, she thought, and felt that from the bottom of her heart. It was all right to cry, but if she did that now, rather than be a release, it might just make her more sad. She couldn't help but think that.

4. Portrait of a Hero

The *Bachrose-go* was a ship belonging to the K&K Pirate Company.

Not only that, it was *the* Archduke Deres Pain's ship.

Naturally, Yume had no idea what an archduke, or a Deres Pine, was. She'd never seen one, never heard of one, and, obviously, never eaten one, either. Though, they said it was a person, so he probably wasn't food. But though he might have been one in the broader sense of the word, Deres Pine was not exactly human, either.

There was a city called Igor. Not on the Red Continent, or in the Coral Archipelago, but in the north of Grimgar, along the coast. It was quite the large port city. It was in the same class as the Free City of Vele, and had once prospered as the Kingdom of Ishmal's door to the sea.

However, the Kingdom of Ishmal was no more. It had fallen. Or rather, it had been destroyed. The lands that were once the Kingdom of Ishmal's domain were now primarily dominated by the undead.

The port city of Igor was not necessarily full of undead every way you looked, but most of its population were from races, like the orcs or undead, that belonged to the Alliance of Kings and were hostile to the human race. The person known as Deres Pain was the lord of Igor, and called himself the Archduke.

Archduke.

Now there's a title that sounds self-important. He wasn't just self-important, he was actually important. When you hear he was the lord of Igor, it's easy to imagine he was just the mayor of a city, and that was what Yume assumed at first, too, but he was actually on the same level as a king of a respectably large nation. After the No-Life King died despite supposedly being without life to begin with, there were four or five influential undead, and Deres Pain was one of them.

Kisaragi, AKA Kisaragicchon, stole that archduke's ship and made it his own. That didn't really make sense. But whatever, it was called the *Bachrose-go*, so it had to be awesome.

The ship was just that impressive, so when Kisaragi later started the K&K Pirate Company, he made the *Bachrose-go* their flagship. The flagship was the ship the most important person rode aboard and bossed everyone around from, so it was the symbol of K&K, too.

Also, though Kisaragi was the one who started up K&K, he wasn't the company president, or the chairman, or anything. The president was a woman named Anjolina Kreitzal who had been a pirate all along, and she was also the captain of their flagship, the *Bachrose-go*, too.

Kisaragi had been leading the *Bachrose-go*, along with some hundreds of other ships that belonged to K&K, in a search for Momohina, with Yume as an added bonus.

That said, K&K had their usual activities of trade, opening new routes, combat, and pillaging to take care of, and they couldn't neglect them. Because of that, each ship searched for Momohina and Yume in their spare time as they went about their usual business.

This wasn't as simple to do as it was to say. Momohina and Yume had vanished at sea, after all. The sea was full of dangers. If a ship was lost in the search, it would be terrible. Besides, they had been tossed from the *Mantis-go* into the sea in the middle of a storm. If you thought about it normally, there was little hope of them having survived. Little to none. Yeah, the odds were basically zero.

There was no point in searching. So they wouldn't search. There was no other option. If Momohina's comrades decided that, it would be impossible to blame them. Honestly, when they were stranded on that remote island, Yume had essentially given up. The possibility that they were being searched for, that someone was out there looking for them, seemed highly unlikely.

Well, of course not. They wouldn't be lookin', right?

However, Kisaragicchon and his comrades had continued the search.

The major reason for that was that the *Mantis-go* had avoided sinking, and her captain, Ginzy, had made it back to the Emerald Archipelago with the other survivors. It wasn't just Momohina and Yume that K&K went out looking for. There were other crew members who had fallen into the sea, and they were

searching for all of them.

“Knowing you, I always sort of figured you weren’t dead. And it wasn’t just me; everyone who knows you felt the same.”

Kisaragi’s mustache, which was too spectacular to seem as if it belonged beneath his nose, twitched as he said that. He was talking about Momohina, of course.

Incidentally, the *Bachrose-go* immediately set sail from Indelica back to the Emerald Archipelago after that, but Momohina was being weirdly standoffish towards Kisaragi. If Kisaragi called her name, she’d let out a, “Meow,” or a, “Fwuh,” and then run away. Even on the occasional times she talked to him, she wouldn’t look him in the eye. From where Yume stood, she couldn’t help but think, *You hugged him super tight, and you were cryin’, too*, but maybe that was why she was so embarrassed, and she was acting shy as a result. Yume was not completely unable to understand those sorts of feelings.

Momohina seemed fixated on playing hide-and-seek with Kisaragi, and Yume couldn’t get her to train her as much as she would have liked, so she was left with a lot of free time in her life aboard the ship. She helped the crew out a bit, but her feelings towards those jobs were lukewarm. Every job was so easy that it was done before she could finish thinking about why her feelings towards it didn’t go past lukewarm into just plain cold. Yume finished everything so quickly that the crew sometimes looked at her like she was being a nuisance.

When she got tired of moving around on her own, which she had now, Yume usually hung out at the side of the ship, staring out at the sea.

She wasn’t thinking about anything in particular there. Though, she didn’t try to dispel whatever thoughts did enter her head, either.

Even when the weather wasn’t bad, the waves were high, and they rocked the boat. That didn’t scare her, or make her sick. She was totally used to it now.

She talked with the captain, Anjolina, just a bit. She was a straight-laced, mature woman, and was feared by her crew, but in a good way. No matter how old Yume got, she would probably never be able to be like that. She could see why it was Anjolina, not Kisaragi, who had become the president of K&K and the captain of the *Bachrose-go*.

But even if Anjolina was the president, the one who was directing K&K was clearly Kisaragi.

He was the leader, but not a leader. It was vague, or maybe half-hearted. Still, everyone in K&K had accepted the strange form it took.

Not all leaders were the same. Just as there were a multitude of different people out there, there were many different leaders as well.

“...That goes for Yume’s and the team’s leader, too,” Yume mumbled, then hung her head.

She had thought about her comrades all the time on the island. She had burst into tears, and wailed, too. It was only supposed to be half a year. In half a year, she would go to Alterna. Yume had asked her friends to wait for her there. She broke her word. It hadn’t been half a year. It had been over two years now. Soon, it would be three. Everyone must have been sick of waiting. No, maybe they had already stopped. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust her comrades, but if she was this late, they were bound to assume something had happened to her. Actually, she hoped they weren’t waiting. They were welcome to forget Yume. She wanted them to forget her. It made her very sad. But it was just Yume who would be sad. If Yume was the only one who was sad, she didn’t mind. Yume could tough it out.

When she thought of her comrades, it hurt so bad she couldn’t breathe.

What hurt, how, and why were things she didn’t want to think about, and she couldn’t. It hurt. It hurt more than she could bear.

She noticed someone approaching. Because of the sound of the wind and the waves, it was hard to make out the footsteps, but that person was banging something hard against the ship’s railing as they walked.

Yume looked up.

It was Kisaragi. The hard thing turned out to be his left hand. Kisaragi had lost his left hand, and replaced it with a prosthetic. The eyepatch over his right eye was not just ornamental, either. Those details were strangely pirate-y, and his mustache made a bold statement, too. Though, with how sparse the rest of his beard was, and how smooth a face he had, it looked totally out of place. Fake,

even.

“Hey.”

Kisaragi raised his prosthetic hand. It might have been a special kind of prosthetic. Despite how it looked, it moved smoothly, almost like a real hand.

“Hey.”

When Yume mimicked his smile and waved back, Kisaragi narrowed his eyes suddenly, and his mustache twisted a little.

“Ah...!”

“Hm?”

“Hey, listen, that mustache... Could it be...?”

“Oh. This?”

Kisaragi pinched the mustache with his right hand, and pulled it.

It came right off.

“It’s fake.”

“...It is, huh? Yume was thinkin’, Momo-san was wearin’ a fake mustache, too, y’know?”

“She was?”

“Yeah. When we first met. She musta been imitatin’ you, Kisaragicchon.”

“You’re gonna call me that, too? Well, whatever, it’s fine.”

“You say ‘Whatever, it’s fine,’ a lot, huh? Kisaragicchon.”

“No, I don’t. I just make a distinction between things I don’t care about, and those I do.”

“Hrrm. Why do you wear a fake mustache, Gicchon?”

“Now you’ve shortened it? Whatever, it’s fine. When I went to the Red Continent, they thought I was a kid. If I had facial hair, though, I looked like an adult. It saved me a surprising amount of hassle.”

“So, it’s like a woman having boobs, huh?”

“There are adult women who are flat, too, you know?”

“Oh, yeah? Yeah, that’s right, huh? Yume’s aren’t big. Neither are Momo-san’s. But, y’know, Captain Anjolina-san, she’s bouncy-bouncy.”

“You want to keep on talking about breasts?”

“Not really, no. But big boobies feel good when you touch them. Speaking of boobs, Shihoru’s got them, too.”

Yume covered her own chest with both hands. She had no words.

Obviously, that part of Yume’s anatomy was a far cry from Shihoru’s. There was little swelling there, and they didn’t feel plump or soft. She felt an intense longing. Yume loved Shihoru’s boobs. Her thighs and her belly were nice, too, but Shihoru’s boobs were something else. She wanted to touch them. To bury her face deep in them.

Would she ever be able to?

“Shihoru? That was one of your comrades, right?”

When Kisaragi asked, Yume nodded. Moving her head up and down like that was all she could manage. If she tried to force herself to speak, it would have come out weird.

“I’ve heard a bit about you guys. One of you pacified the dragons in the Emerald Archipelago while I was away, right? The hero of Roronea. The Dragon Rider. Haruhiro, was it?”

Yeah.

Haru-kun, he doesn’t act like a leader much, but he’s a real leader. He’s always thinkin’ about Yume, and everyone else. Even more than he thinks about himself. That’s wonderful. He’s the best leader for Yume, and for everyone.

Yume puffed her cheeks up. Her face was probably bright red. She wanted to tell him about it properly, but couldn’t say a word. Really, all she could do was nod.

“Don’t sweat it.”

Kisaragi put his hand—the real one, not the prosthetic—on top of Yume’s

head. His hand wasn't big. Despite that, Yume's head seemed to fit comfortably inside it.

"You're Momohina's apprentice, right? That makes you part of the family. First thing I'll do is take you back to Grimgar. And if you need anything else, just tell me. There are things I can't do, but not many. Rely on me."

Yeah.

...Yeah.

Was it all right for her to nod so carelessly? Kisaragi was saying, "Rely on me," after all. If she nodded, that meant she would rely on Kisaragi, and that she would depend on him. But even in her uncertainty, she felt compelled to nod.

"...Gicchon."

"Yeah?"

"Yume, she..."

She was about to cry, and that was why she wasn't able to say nothin'.

Yume still felt like she was about to cry at any moment. Her heart was so full of emotion, but the tears never came, no matter how much it seemed like they would. She started to feel like, *Maybe there's no need to be cryin'.*

That had to be thanks to Kisaragi.

"...Gicchon. You're kinda cool, huh?"

"Yeah, I get that sometimes."

Kisaragi gave that simple response, then retracted the hand he'd placed on Yume's head.

"I am the one and only great hero, after all."

5. Heartbreak

The *Bachrose-go* made it back to port in Roronea without a hitch. By that time, Momohina had stopped running and hiding from Kisaragi, and instead followed him around to the point he said, "You're being too clingy, stay away

from me.” Though despite that, Kisaragi didn’t push her away, so Momohina never left him alone as much as he would have liked. It got to the point where she was going to sleep wrapped tightly around him at night, too.

Momo-san sure loves Gicchon, huh?

Yume liked Kisaragi, too. If she had met him before meeting Haruhiro and the others, she probably would have gone with him instead. But the more her affection for Kisaragi grew, the more she realized just how important Haruhiro and the others were to her.

Yume tried to calm down and think about it. With all that had happened, there was no guarantee she would be able to reunite with Haruhiro and the rest. She might be able to, and she might not, but Yume wasn’t scared anymore.

When she thought about never seeing her comrades again, it felt like something had torn her heart apart, twisted her neck, and ripped her body to pieces. It was really painful, but she had no intention to avert her eyes from it and spend her days idly thinking about how she’d really like to see everyone again. She just held on to hope that she could. She would prepare for the worst outcome, but never give up, set a goal, and work towards it. She couldn’t afford to be scared.

The major players of the K&K Pirate Company, with the exception of the undead section head Jimmy, were all out. They had been busily taking ships here and there, partially to search for Momohina. The officers of K&K were managing director Giancarlo, HPW (a title that apparently meant Healing Partner Woman) Ichika, EDB (Elf with Disappointing Boobs. Was that a job title?) Mirilieu, and DNW (Dwarven Night-crawling Woman. Hard to see this one as an appropriate job title.) Heinemarie. The incorrigible sahuagin Ginzy was still around as the captain of the *Neo Mantis-go*, too. He, of course, didn’t know Momohina was all right. He was going to be pretty happy when he found out.

Once they loaded up on supplies, surrounded by the cheers of the pirates and residents of Roronea, the *Bachrose-go* hurriedly left port. Kisaragi didn’t say, “You’ve gotta be in a hurry, right?” to Yume. But that had to be what it was about.

She was awfully late. Hurrying now wasn’t going to help, but she still wanted

to get ashore in Grimgar as soon as she possibly could. If she could, she would have transformed into a bird and flown to Alterna.

The *Bachrose-go* wasn't heading to the Free City of Vele, and obviously not to Igor, but to a different port altogether.

That port had a difficult name, Nugwidu, and was situated far to the south of Vele. There was an unusual group of people called the Zwiba who had lived in the area around Nugwidu since long ago, and it was said that they had formed a small country. The Zwiba had their own language, customs, and culture, and did not interact with the other races in any way. If the Zwiba saw anyone who was not a Zwiba, they ganged up on them, captured them, and then, of all things, they ate them.

Yume had known that they were weird and super dangerous for a long time, and wanted to avoid them.

But why did Kisaragi know the Zwiba? He said it was because he had actually been captured, and then nearly eaten, by them before.

"I mean, you know how my arm is, right? They looked at me and were like, 'That's weird. Is it really okay to eat this guy?' Then, while they were busy being confused, stuff happened, and we ended up becoming friends."

Just what had to happen to make someone become friends with the people who had tried to eat them? Yume couldn't imagine. Whatever it was, the *Bachrose-go* was heading to port in Nugwidu.

The Zwiba were extremely xenophobic, so they lacked the technology to build large ships or ports. According to Kisaragi, any Zwiba ship other than a fishing boat that came out of Nugwidu never returned. It might be that the Zwiba had come from across the sea, and were trying to return to their homeland. According to Kisaragi, rather than go to Vele, it would be faster to return to Alterna via Nugwidu. She could head west from Nugwidu into the Quickwind Plains, and then if she just kept heading towards the Tenryu Mountains in the south, there was no worry that she'd get lost.

As far as Yume was concerned, Kisaragi was guaranteeing that was the case, and she had no reason to doubt him. She didn't feel worried at all. She was really looking forward to meeting these Zwiba people.

Momohina stayed on the *Bachrose-go*. She was going to work with Yume until they reached Nugwidu, and put the finishing touches on her training.

They ran and jumped around on top of the swaying ship, practicing. After a fulfilling first day of the trip, on the morning of the second day, Yume awoke in a hammock in the cabin.

Maybe because she'd spent so long living in near nudity on the island, it felt like such a bother to wear clothes. No matter what she was wearing, she stripped out of it while sleeping. She woke up naked again today. It would be kind of bad if she stayed like this, so she put on a short top that was just enough to hide her chest, and a super short pair of pants, then splashed some water on her face and rinsed her mouth a little.

When she went up on deck, the sun had just come up, but there was nothing to block it on the sea, so it was already bright out. Yume liked the sea when it was a little earlier than this, with the sun just about to rise. The sea as the sun was setting was nice, too, but it made her feel lonely sometimes.

She should've woken up sooner. As she walked around on deck, feeling a little disappointed, she found a man near the prow, bare from the waist up, doing what looked like exercises.

Who was he? He was looking the other way, so she couldn't see his face. She knew all the crew of the *Bachrose-go*. No. This man wasn't part of the crew.

He was really well-built. The muscles on his back looked like the face of a terrifying monster. But though he was tall, he wasn't too big. There was no waste. He'd trained to the extreme, and his body was like a well-sharpened blade.

At some point, Yume found herself staring.

The man did things like slowly spin his arms, stretch his joints, bend over, and stand on one leg. He wasn't doing anything all that special, but she couldn't tear her eyes away for a second.

The man was strong.

Incredibly, unbelievably strong.

Her heart raced, and there was a buzz through her entire body. Did she need to pee? No, it was different from that. What was this feeling, like something was squeezing her on the inside?

The man turned around.

At that moment, she realized his short hair was silver.

“Oh, it’s you.”



“Fwuh.”

Yume was going to call his name, but for some reason it wouldn't come out.

She knew him. He'd come to Grimgar on the same day as her. They weren't friends, but they were comrades, at least in the broader sense of the word.

They hadn't met in a while. Though, that didn't just go for him. She'd been alone with Momohina for so long. She hadn't seen anyone in a while.

“...You were aboard? Ridin' this ship...? Huhhhh? Why?”

“I was on the Red Continent for a while. I have dealings with K&K. I was in the Emerald Archipelago, waiting for a ship to Grimgar.”

“Ohhh.... Okay. So you caught a ride on this ship, huh? Okay... Yume, she had no idea. Not until now.”

“I did know, though. I couldn't help but hear that Kisaragi found the two women that went missing after their ship ran into trouble.”

“Oh. If you were in Roronea, you would have heard, yeah? ...If you knew, why didn't you say somethin'?”

“I saw you yesterday, but you and Momohina were jumping and bouncing around.”

“Ohhh, trainin'. We were doing that, huh? ...Okay. ...Um, er, uh...”

Why did she get so tense whenever she tried to say his name?

There was something wrong with Yume. What was her problem? She thought about it, but came up blank. Whatever it was, it was inconvenient not being able to utter the name of a person she knew when they were right in front of her. She had to force herself to say it.

“Renji!”

When she shouted it out loud, Renji blinked.

“...What?”

“Hmmm, uh... Yume was wonderin' if you knew anythin' about where Harukun and the others are? Yume, she was away trainin', and then there was that

thing, with the boat, and the storm... She hasn't seen them in a long, long time."

"I've been on the Red Continent for about a year, and I hadn't been back to Alterna for close to a year before that."

"Oh, yeah? There's no way you'd know, then, huh?"

"I heard Haruhiro rode a dragon in the Emerald Archipelago. I guess you split with them after that, huh?"

"Yeah... That was a long... long time ago, huh...?"

"Well, he is the Dragon Rider."

When Renji suddenly smiled, the tension in Yume's heart melted away.

She'd thought that he never smiled, and that he was a more difficult person than this. Or maybe it was the flow of time that had changed Renji.

"He won't bite it that easily. Even you managed to survive, after all."

"...Mm-hm. Yeah. When you're the one sayin' it, it sounds convincent."

"You mean convincing?"

"That's the one. Yeah. Convincing."

Suddenly, Yume had a thought. Renji had changed. Yume felt like she was different than before she washed up on the island, too. There probably wasn't anything that didn't change. So people changed, too.

Haruhiro and the others were probably totally different from before, too.

"I thought I was a good judge of people."

Renji's eyes were focused off somewhere in the distance.

"I was wrong. I thought you guys were trash. It wasn't a question of if I could use you or not. You'd be dead in no time. There was that Manato guy, right? Man, did he draw the short straw. It got him killed quick. Moguzo. If he'd survived, he would have gotten stronger. Anyone who got involved with you people would die. Every last one. They'd all die. It was instinct. I never doubted it. Not one bit."

The words which dripped from Renji's mouth like large raindrops were like transparent, empty containers.

They shattered when they struck the ground. But they weren't containers, just his voice, just words, so nothing was left there.

"Every last one of you was going to die. It wasn't that I was underestimating you. That's just how I thought it was. Like how if you pour water on a fire, it goes out. I've never been indecisive. It's ridiculous. If you have time to stop and think, you should be walking forward. You'll be that much further ahead. What's there to be indecisive about? It's dumb."

"Renji."

"Yeah."

"Did somethin'... happen?"

"Nothing."

Renji lowered his eyes and pressed his hand against his head, like he was scratching his silver hair. There was a smile on his lips. It was like all he could do was laugh about it.

"Nothing happened. I'm me. No more, no less. Nothing else. I hope you can meet your party."

"...Yeah. Thanks."

Renji held up his hand a little as he left. That was all she saw of him for the day, but it stayed on her mind the whole time.

The next day, Yume walked around the ship, searching for Renji. The *Bachrose-go* was a really big ship. Still, it wasn't as wide as a castle, or as complex as a maze. On the stairs inside the ship, she didn't find Renji, but she did find another man with a buzz-cut that she recognized.

"Hohhhh! Um, erm, what was your name again...?"

"It's Ron."

Ron, the man with the buzz-cut, stared at Yume's face, tucked his chin in, and lowered his eyes. Then he let out a sigh.

“I’m amazed you can walk around in that... shameless outfit when you’re on a ship with a bunch of guys starving for a woman.”

“Huh? Blameless? Outfit?”

“No, not blameless. Shameless. It’s shameless. I mean, you know? It’s, uh... erotic, I guess...?”

“Erotic, huh? Hmm. Sexy?”

“...Yeah, sort of. No, that’s exactly it.”

“Mwohhhh. Yume’s never been called sexy before.”

“Well, I think taste is part of it. I just happen to find girls like you sexy.”

“Ronron’s the kinda guy who finds Yume sexy, huh?”

“Yes, that’s right, but don’t just say that. It’s embarrassing. No, I know I said it myself first. Shit! Now it sounds like I’m confessing my feelings for you!”

“Ronron’s convertin’ to Yume?”

“Not converting. What would I even convert? It’s confessing! And, no, I’m not! As if! And who said you could call me Ronron? That’s, uh, y’know, for people who are closer... I-like a guy and a girl who are g-going out? It’s a way of conumicating their feelings...”

“Listen, Yume’s been corrected on this one before, but it’s not conumication, it’s, uh, cobracuist...?”

“Huh? Cobra twist...?”

“Crabwist? Was that it?”

“Whatever you’re trying to say, it’s wrong.”

“Yume was thinkin’ that, too.”

“...Talking to you is exhausting. What kind of magical realm exists around you? It’s like I’m in a different dimension, but there’s a part of me that kinda likes it...”

“Oh, yeah? Yume’s havin’ fun talkin’ to you, so she kinda likes it too, huh?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Is this a reverse confession? Seriously? I mean, I’m free

right now. No, I mean, I basically always am. Not that I'm not popular or anything, obviously. I'm just always on the move. I haven't been able to do anything that lasts..."

"Oh!"

"Wh-What?! You want to go out already?!"

"Mmm, see, Yume, she was doin' somethin'. She just remembered. Yesterday mornin', she was talkin' to Renji."

"Oh, in the end, it's all about Renji, huh?! It always is! For women and men! Renji, Renji, Renji, Renji, Renji! Shiiiiit!"

Ron suddenly slammed his head against the wall. He was bashing it so hard, Yume was dumbfounded. It took a while, but by the time it occurred to her that she should stop him, Ron had already ceased the repeated headbutts.

"...You know what? I get it. I mean, I'm into Renji, too, in my own way, okay? It's a guy crush. So, I understand the feeling, yeah. I know it so bad it hurts..."

Ron pressed his forehead against the wall, balling his hands into fists. What had him so frustrated? He was grinding his teeth so hard you could hear it.

Yume grabbed Ron by the shoulder and the jaw. "Heave-ho!" She pulled him closer, and made him face her. From what she could see, Ron's forehead had turned red, but he wasn't bleeding.

"Okay. Looks like you're alright."

"...S-Stop!"

Ron brushed Yume's hands off him, and looked away from her.

"I-I'll fall for you..."

"Hm? Fall where?"

"In my heart."

"Nngh. Is that really possible? To fall like that? Like, whoosh, plop."

"...I'm falling right now. Falling hard, okay? What's gonna happen if I can't forget you anymore...?"

“Yume’d be happier if you remembered her, not forgot her.”

“That’s what I’m talking about, the way you’re like that...”

Yume wasn’t quite sure what Ron was talking about. When she cocked her head to the side, Ron cleared his throat, as if trying to smooth things over and get back to normal.

“Listen... About Renji.”

“Yeah. Where do you think he is?”

“Could you leave him alone for now?”

Ron’s tone changed completely, becoming somber.

Yume stared at Ron’s face. She thought he might be crying. He wasn’t. But it was an odd look on his face. His eyes were empty, but he was twitching here and there like he was in the middle of a smile. Wrinkles formed on his brow, and he looked angry, too.

“I’m sure you haven’t heard. He wouldn’t tell you himself. That’s the kind of guy Renji is.”

“Tell me...? Um, about what?”

“Do you remember Sassa?”

“The girl, right? The one in your party.”

“You didn’t remember my name, but you remember Sassa? ...Well, whatever. You see, Sassa, she...”

“She... what?”

Before Ron could say the words, Yume got a feeling about what had happened.

It was exactly what she expected.

6. We Who Cannot be Alone

She had never forgotten the first time she lost a comrade.

It was a long time ago now, so it didn’t make her heart ache constantly, but

whenever she remembered Manato, she wanted to howl like a wolf on a moonlit night.

Yume liked wolves. It was too bad, but she wasn't a wolf, so she couldn't actually howl. Yume didn't know why wolves sounded so lonely when they howled, but they lived in packs centered around a pair of alphas. If a member of their pack got lost or died, the wolves would howl repeatedly. This was something she'd heard from her master in the hunters' guild, so she knew it wasn't nonsense. The wolves were probably trying to call back the ones they'd lost. Yume wanted to see her comrades so bad she could've howled, too. But no matter what she did, the dead wouldn't come back.

It hurt the second time, too. It might have even been more painful when they lost Moguzo. They'd been with him longer. No, it was more than that. Compared to losing one person who's precious to you, losing two would obviously hurt more. It was tearing at an open wound.

After that, Yume ran into Renji on the deck a few more times, but all they did was say hi. From the look of it, Renji was hardly even talking with his own comrades, Ron, Adachi the mage with glasses, and Chibi the priest.

Renji, Ron, the thorny and difficult-to-approach Adachi, the silent, or so quiet you couldn't hear her, Chibi-chan, and the now-deceased Sassa had all come to Grimgar on the same day as Yume and her party. What would you call their relationship? Contemporaries, maybe? What exactly had happened to them? Yume would be lying if she said she didn't want to know, but even if they did tell her the details, there was nothing she could do. If they wanted to open up, she'd gladly listen, but she felt it would be wrong to make them tell her.

Yume devoted herself to training with Momohina.

The old Yume might have stared off in a daze, or occupied herself with something else because she didn't want to have to think about Haruhiro, or Renji, or any of the others. What she was doing now was similar, but a little different.

No matter how seriously she thought about it, there were things she couldn't do. She had to set those things aside, and try her hardest at the rest. That was all there was to it.

On the night before the *Bachrose-go* was to reach Nugwidu, she fought a practice match with no time limit against Momohina.

There were no particular victory conditions. She had sparred with Momohina more times than she could count. They both knew what was a win and what was a loss. That wasn't important. In a serious match, Yume had little chance of beating Momohina. The focus here was whether or not she could get Momohina to recognize her. In a way, this was her graduation exam.

They faced one another on the deck and lightly touched the backs of their hands together. Just as she thought, *Okay, time to attack*, Momohina grabbed Yume by the wrist. Before she could cry out in surprise, she had been thrown. She was at enough of a disadvantage to begin with, and going second was going to make her situation even worse. Yume panicked. Even she could figure that out, though, so she managed to calm herself down somehow.

When she tried to put some distance between them, Momohina closed the gap and grabbed her. Momohina easily locked Yume's joints. Yume was thrown.

Momohina was different from usual. She was expressionless throughout. The way she moved, it was like she was a different person, too. Yume was facing a Momohina she didn't know.

Yume wasn't calm, she was irritated. No, indignant.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Yume had intended to fight Momohina with everything she had. Momohina had completely reshaped the way Yume fought, teaching her everything she now knew. It didn't suit Momohina's personality, but Yume already saw her as a sort of mother figure. This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

Momohina was silent, and her moves were quick and slippery.

Yume was getting more and more emotional. That was clearly a bad thing, but she couldn't control it. When she got worked up, it made her tense all over. Her movements naturally became straighter, and were easily seen through.

It was a miserable defeat. She wasn't just badly defeated, she was utterly crushed.

She had countless bruises, pain in her shoulders, arms, wrists, and fingers,

and a number of broken bones. Chibi-chan healed her with light magic, so the physical damage didn't remain, but it was still depressing. She hadn't been so completely unable to do anything since back when she first started training on the island.

Though, she did see what Momohina was trying to show her.

"...It's not just about power and technique, it's about who you're fightin' against, too, huh?"

"You got it! That's my Yumeryun! You've got good intuition. That's perfect. Well done!"

Momohina patted Yume on the head. She was already back to the usual Momohina.

Yume had been training under Momohina all this time. It was no exaggeration to say that Momohina knew everything there was to know about her. Even if she went all-out against an opponent like that, she was going to get crushed easily. If Yume really wanted to show Momohina the fruits of her training, she would've had to at the very least try an attack that could catch her off-guard.

In contrast to Yume, who performed what she had been taught with a stupid level of faithfulness, what had Momohina done? She had used a wide variety of throws and joint-locking techniques that she hadn't shown off before. Yume had been confused, and shaken up, as intended. Unable to deal with it properly, she'd put on a humiliating performance.

Even after studying harder than anyone, building her muscles, heightening her agility, and polishing her technique, it still wasn't enough.

Depending on her opponent, and how she fought, the way a battle looked would change considerably. Basically, even a weak fighter, if she played her cards right, could win against a strong one. Or the possibility existed, at least.

Conversely, if a strong fighter acted with arrogance, a weaker fighter might trip them up. Even if they weren't being particularly unwary, the weaker fighter might do something unexpected and defeat them.

Anything could happen at any time. There were no absolutes.

That was the last thing Momohina had chosen to teach Yume.

Yume slept well in her hammock. When she woke and went up on deck, she could see land off in the distance. She cried just a little. Yume was finally back.

The *Bachrose-go* dropped anchor in the port at Nugwidu around noon.

The Zwiba would probably welcome her with open arms. There was a large number of them gathered around the jetty when she came alongside it. But they didn't cheer, or wave. Not only were they silent, they looked unusual, too. They were humanoids, but their skin was a grayish rock-like color, and there wasn't a single strand of hair on their heads. Their eyes were jet black, with no whites, and their faces, arms, and legs—basically their whole bodies—were covered in blue and yellow line patterns. Their clothing came in brown, purple, and a number of dark colors. Each and every one of them carried a long, thin pole. No exceptions. Not made of wood, but of metal. The rods were lustrous and tipped with a variety of different heads.

When Kisaragi stuck his hand over the side of the ship and gave them a thumbs up, they all banged the ends of their rods on the ground twice, in unison.

“They're all so shy, huh?”

Was that the issue? Internally, Yume was a bit scared to get off the ship. But once she saw Kisaragi and Momohina walk down the gangway like it was no big deal, then give the Zwiba a thumbs up again, and start slapping them on the shoulders, she decided it was apparently all right.

When she disembarked from the ship and approached, the Zwiba people all had a nice, sweet smell about them, like freshly baked pastries. It wasn't just the color; their skin had a rocky texture to it, too. Their black eyes had golden lines in the back, and the way they swayed as the Zwiba glanced towards her was mysterious, and so pretty it made her let out a sigh of admiration. Their legs were bare, and they wore no shoes. Their hands and feet each had seven fingers or toes.

The Zwiba all looked the same to Yume, and she couldn't tell them apart. However, there was one Zwiba who was shorter, with a head covered in white patterns. The rod held by that Zwiba was colorless and transparent. As Kisaragi

spoke to that Zwiba, making use of a lot of pantomime, Yume heard their language for the first time.

“Uhh. Tohh. Nhh. Tohhto. Muhh. Ohh. Nhh. Tohhto. Nhh. Tohh. Uhh. Tohh.”

Naturally, Yume had no idea what they were saying. She had heard a lot of languages, but the Zwiba’s had to be among the weirdest of them. Who knew there were people who spoke like this? The world was a big place.

That day, the Zwiba invited Kisaragi, Momohina, Yume, and Team Renji into a large building, and received them there.

Though, the reception was just a bunch of food and drink laid out on a wide, otherwise bare stone floor, and nobody sang or danced. The food mainly used fish along with greens, root vegetables, and nuts. There was plenty available, and all of the dishes made the most of their ingredients’ flavors. Actually, they were all very lightly spiced, and none of it was salty. The drinks seemed to be a variety of fruit juices diluted with water, and they only barely had any taste, either.

“Don’t they have any booze...?” Ron grumbled, but the Zwiba apparently had no custom of drinking alcohol. They didn’t sing or dance, and they avoided talking in front of other people. They liked lying on the ground, motionless, more than anything, but they would fall asleep if they stayed like that too long, so they wouldn’t do it to the point of actually sleeping. That was how Kisaragi described them.

They all slept together in the same room that night. The Zwiba didn’t use bedrolls, or anything like that, so Yume slept on the stone floor, too. When she woke up, she was wrapped in a blanket. Someone had apparently draped it over her. When she looked around the dark room, there were two Zwiba walking through the room carrying blankets, while still also carrying their poles. After that, she fell into a deep sleep.

To help Yume and Team Renji on their trip back to Alterna, the Zwiba prepared horse-dragons for them. Horse-dragons were small dragons that walked on their hind legs. Normally, horse-dragons raised in captivity would have had their wings clipped. However, the Zwiba’s horse-dragons’ wings had been left intact, which let them do things like glide for short distances, and run

on water. Yume had heard they wouldn't listen to people, or let you put things on their backs, unless their wings were cut. Yet the Zwiba's horse-dragons were friendly and docile.

Yume and Team Renji were seen off by Kisaragi, Momohina, the *Bachrose-go* crew lead by Captain Anjolina, and upwards of one hundred Zwiba as they set out from Nugwidu early in the morning.

Parting ways with Momohina made her feel lonely, and Yume was worried that she'd get all sappy. But Momohina and Kisaragi were so blasé about the whole thing, she was actually able to leave them with a smile.

"See ya later, Yumeryun!"

"Yeah, later."

"Say hi to your party for us."

"Momo-san and Gicchon, say hi to your comrades for Yume, too. Like Ginzy, and Giancarlulun. Oh, and Jimmy-chan, too."

Adachi, the mage who wore glasses, confidently said that he knew the way back to Alterna, and there was no way he'd get them lost, so Yume decided to let him handle it. All they needed to do was follow the Tenryu Mountains west, so it would work out either way.

When the Zwiba's horse-dragons ran into uneven terrain, they would flap their wings and hover over it as they moved forward. They did that a lot, and the unique floating feeling made her feel a bit sick at first, but Yume got used to it quickly. Renji was fine too, obviously, and so were Ron and Chibi-chan, but for a while Adachi looked pale, and just kept mumbling, "I'm nauseous, so nauseous..." Still, he kept up, and didn't fall behind.

The horse-dragons moved at a good speed, but once they got hungry, you couldn't make them budge an inch. They were omnivores, and would eat the leaves and stems of plants, roots, bugs, small animals, carrion, and just about anything, honestly, so they could just be let loose to hunt and forage for themselves. There was no need to prepare feed for them. They would munch on whatever was nearby, and come back when they were full. One time, Ron got impatient and tried to drag back his horse-dragon while it was still eating,

but it got mad and wouldn't let him ride it anymore. The problem was solved when he traded horse-dragons with Yume, but it showed them the creatures could be stubborn, and they had to be careful.

Yume and Team Renji went until their horse-dragons came to a stop. When they refused to go any further, the group rested, ate, or slept. Adachi was the only one who grumbled about it "throwing his schedule off." Team Renji were used to traveling.

Traveling with them like this, Yume could see the shape of their party, and the members' personalities, clearly. Learning to understand them held her interest for a while.

Ron could be annoying sometimes, but he barely talked when they weren't resting, and he would volunteer to take care of the grunt work. Adachi, who looked smart, acted as a sounding board for Renji, while Chibi-chan was quiet, supporting the group in a lot of little ways that didn't stand out.

Renji was really scary, and would make his comrades do what he told them to without argument. The others couldn't push back. That was what Yume used to think their party was like. She couldn't say what it was like in the past, but it didn't seem to be that way now, at least.

It was true that Renji had an intensely intimidating presence. He wasn't sociable at all. Even with his comrades, he was blunt. He never made jokes or laughed, and didn't chit-chat. Renji was surrounded by comrades, but it felt almost like he was all alone. But Ron and the others had accepted that was how he was. They knew Renji didn't like others worrying about him, so they made a point of leaving him alone. Still, they would talk to him when necessary, and he wouldn't ignore them when they did.

What happened with Sassa must have been part of it. Renji was hurting. If someone who didn't know the circumstances saw him, they might not think it, but Renji was crushed, in his own way. It must have been the same for Ron, Adachi, and Chibi-chan, too. They weren't acting hurt, or openly worrying, or reflecting on the past. They just headed for Alterna. That must have been how they'd traveled all along.

With Sassa.

One of their precious comrades had died. They didn't wail about it; they silently accepted it for what it was.

On the third day after they set out from Nugwidu, they entered the Quickwind Plains. According to Adachi, unless something changed, they would reach Alterna in another four or five days. That was nothing.

Before sunset, their horse-dragons stopped in an open field, so they decided to make camp for the night.

Adachi handled the cooking in Team Renji. He was the pickiest about taste, and would find something to complain about no matter who else made it. That was apparently what got him put in charge. That night's meal was gruel with dried meat, vegetables, and mushrooms. It was mouthwateringly good. Adachi had a lot of spices and seasonings, and he could make any ingredients taste good. It was seriously impressive.

Ron always started snoring softly the moment he laid down. He could sleep anywhere, anytime, and as long as he was allowed.

Chibi-chan would be rolled up into an even tinier ball than usual one moment, and then be sitting, or gone, and then back again the next. The way Chibi-chan acted was a mystery, but her comrades didn't find her mysterious in the slightest. Yume tried to talk to her whenever she had the chance, but Chibi-chan's responses were just, "Aye," or, "No," nine times out of ten, and it never developed into a substantive conversation.

Though she didn't really get Chibi-chan, Yume could sense an earnestness and sincerity in everything that she did. Chibi-chan was the kind of person who would give anything for her comrades. When Sassa was still around, Team Renji would have been a party with three men and two women. Maybe there had been a special relationship between the two of them, like you would expect? When she thought about it, Yume couldn't help but wish she could really talk it over with Chibi-chan. But that was probably sticking her nose where it didn't belong.

Renji would lay out all his things, then use one of them as a pillow, and always sleep in the same position. He'd only use his own utensils and toiletries. He shaved his beard meticulously, and combed his hair neatly, even though it was

short. He did the same things every day, in the same order, and the same way. It had never occurred to Yume before, but he must have been a highly methodical person.

Yume always just did whatever. She drank as much water as she could when she could, and did the same for food, but she wasn't picky. She slept when it was dark, and moved when it was light out, but she could manage the opposite just fine, too. If she tried to sleep, she usually could, and when she couldn't, well, that was that. She'd just have to stay awake until she got sleepy. She felt like, in her time living on the island, she had become even more random than before.

It looked like tonight was going to be one of those nights when she couldn't sleep.

Renji was lying down, too, but his eyes probably weren't even closed. They were in the middle of a pitch-dark field, and they'd put out the fire, so she couldn't see a thing. Still, she could sense him.

"Hey, Renji."

"Yeah."

Renji replied immediately. He really was awake, like she had thought.

"Why'd you go to the Red Continent?"

She regretted the question as soon as she'd asked it. She didn't mean to touch on what happened with Sassa. That was why she'd tried to pick a different topic. But Renji had just come back from the Red Continent. That was most likely where Sassa lost her life. She might end up reminding him of her.

"Because it was stifling here."

Yume may not have needed to worry, because Renji was quick to answer.

"There was this guy in Alterna, Garlan Vedoy, who said he wanted to meet with us. He's a margrave, or something, for the Kingdom of Arabakia, and lives in some stupidly tall mansion called Tenboro Tower. When I said no, Britney at the Volunteer Soldier Corps Office made a big fuss over it. He was being so annoying about it, I said if the guy wanted to see me, he could come down from

his mansion himself.”

“Woo. So, um, Petrie-san...?”

“Vedoy.”

“Did Berorin-san come down?”

“...He didn’t. From what Britney was saying, he was pretty pissed. I don’t know who the guy thinks he is, but he’s clearly got a pretty high opinion of himself. I hate guys like that so much it makes me sick.”

“Well, you’re not... Grimgarian? Yume isn’t either, though. You must’ve been annoyed, gettin’ pulled into Grimgar stuff like that.”

“That’s about right. It’s not just Vedoy. The other volunteer soldiers were kind of in my way, too.”

“So you went to the Red Continent, huh?”

“I made them tag along with my selfishness.”

It sounded like Renji was trying to say something after that, but swallowed the words.

She knew she shouldn’t say anything, but Yume couldn’t help herself.

“...It doesn’t seem like everyone else feels that way. They don’t just do things because you said so. Yume can see that everyone’s stayin’ with you because they want to be your comrades.”

“That’s your perspective.”

“Yeah. You’re right. Yume can’t be sure about anythin’ but Yume herself.”

“There’s no way you could know how others feel.”

“Well then, that makes it strange for you to be up and decidin’ how everyone else must feel, huh?”

“...Yeah.”

“It’s pretty hard askin’ people, ‘How do you all feel?’ Even though, when you’re with them, you could ask anytime, huh?”

Renji laughed just a little, then said, “Yeah,” again. “Sorry about this. I know

you got separated from your comrades, and you're all alone."

"Yume's not quite alone."

"...Huh?"

"You're here, and everyone else is, too. Before that, there was Momo-san. Then Gicchon came and saved us. Yume's not alone."

"...Oh, yeah?"

After that, Renji fell quiet. She could sense that he hadn't fallen asleep. But Yume herself was getting drowsy. As her consciousness was drifting off, just before she passed out, she felt like she heard Renji's voice.

"The only ones who are really alone are the guys who died, huh...?"g

7. Remember Me

In the distance, there was a walled city. It didn't give Yume a feeling of nostalgia; it was more of a, *It's kinda small and cute, huh?*

Alterna wasn't a town that formed naturally by people coming together, building houses, plowing fields, raising cattle, and the population growing. A small number of people had been driven south of the Tenryu Mountains by the Alliance of Kings, and they built a sturdy fortress to defend themselves from enemy attacks. That was how Alterna got started.

There were fields and pastures around Alterna now, and outlying villages, too, creating an image of a town and its outskirts. But originally, it was just a fortress, standing alone. The center of Grimgar was further north in the past, and there was nothing but a city called Damuro around here. That's why, after taking out Damuro and the Cyrene Mines, the Alliance of Kings lost interest in these frontier lands, and the leading races, the orcs and undead, returned north, leaving it to the kobolds and goblins. The goblins took Damuro, and the kobolds took Cyrene, as their bases of operations.

The Kingdom of Arabakia had long since paid the goblins of Damuro to turn a blind eye to the construction of Alterna. That was apparently the reason they hadn't sent the military to attack Damuro yet.

None of this really made any sense to Yume, she realized.

When she first became a volunteer soldier, she'd killed a lot of goblins in Damuro. It felt wrong at first, but she eventually became fine with it. If a goblin attacked her now, she could put it down without hesitating. But unlike back then, Yume was able to think, *Is this really okay?* now.

One day, she woke up in Grimgar, and ended up becoming a volunteer soldier. She didn't particularly hate goblins, but even if they were humanoid, they weren't human, and she couldn't understand their language. Though, they weren't scary like orcs. They hung out in Damuro, close to Alterna, so they made convenient prey. No, they were dangerous enemies at first. It was a group of goblins and a hobgoblin that had taken Manato from them. But they avenged him. Yume killed a whole lot of goblins. Maybe they had friends and family. Forgan, a group led by an orc named Jumbo, had a goblin beastmaster named Onsa with them. Yume liked animals, too. She'd probably get along with Onsa. But they couldn't be friends.

Because goblins were the enemy.

Were they really? Yume wasn't one of the humans of the Kingdom of Arabakia who had been beaten down by the Alliance of Kings. She shouldn't have had any reason to be an enemy to orcs, undead, goblins, or kobolds. Alterna wasn't Yume's homeland.

Still, as they approached, she started to think, *Yume's home*.

From the look of things, Alterna was still Alterna. The hill next to it was still covered in graves, and the sealed tower that loomed above it was just as she remembered it.

It was evening, so she might not go until tomorrow, but it occurred to her she should go and visit Manato and Moguzo. She hadn't in quite a while, after all. She hadn't been able to go.

Even if she went, they wouldn't be there. Even if she had things she'd like to tell them, they couldn't hear her. Still, remembering them, and going to visit from time to time, held meaning for Yume.

How had Team Renji honored Sassa? Renji probably wouldn't want to say.

Maybe she'd ask Ron or Adachi later.

Alterna looked unchanged at a distance, but when they tried to go in through the north gate, there was a large number of soldiers from the Frontier Army there, and they made a huge fuss.

"Hey, you're Renji, aren't you?"

"It's Renji."

"Renji's back."

"It's the Silver Wolf!"

"It's Renji! The Silver Wolf has returned to Alterna!"

The soldiers around the gate and walls all lifted their swords or spears into the air, raised their arms in the banzai position, cheered, and generally made a lot of excited noise. Yume was dumbfounded.

"...You're super popular, huh, Renji? What's a chilper pulf?"

"Silver Wolf."

Adachi gave Yume a look of disdain through his glasses. She wasn't sure he should be so quick to blatantly look down on people.

"Renji's hair is silver, right? That's why they started calling him that."

"Woooo. That's so cool. Haru-kun's 'Dragon Rider' is pretty amazin', too, though."

"...Yeah, Dragon Rider's not bad, I'll give you that." Ron raised a dubious eyebrow. "Still, no matter how you slice it, this is weird. I mean, security's way too tight."

Chibi-chan was glancing around, her eyes slightly downcast. At a glance, she might not look it, but the girl was far more cautious than most people.

What was Renji thinking as he was about to pass through the gate, driving his horse-dragon forward without even glancing at the guards? Ron and the others followed him. Yume hesitated just a little, but decided to stay with them a little longer. There was a place she needed to stop by as soon as she returned to Alterna. Team Renji said they would be going there first, too.

Alterna was small. Even coming in the north gate, it took no time to reach the southern district.

The building they were heading for flew a flag with a red crescent moon on a white field, and had a sign out front. The moment she saw the sign, “Whoa?!” she cried out. “They got a new sign, huh! Huh!”

“...Huh?” Ron didn’t seem to get it, but Chibi-chan’s eyes widened, and she inhaled sharply, while Adachi mumbled, “She’s right.” Renji seemed unimpressed. It didn’t matter to him.

The sign had once read, “Altern Fronter Arm Voluter Solder Cops Red Mon.” But now it read, “Alterna Frontier Army Volunteer Soldier Corps Red Moon.” That was what it was supposed to say all along, but some letters had faded off the old one.

When they tied their horse-dragons up in the stables and went in, there were a number of men and women who looked like volunteer soldiers in the main hall. Everyone started making a fuss when they saw Renji, but they all seemed intimidated, and no one called out to him.

“Renji...?”

The man behind the counter with his arms crossed had a sparkle in his light blue eyes. His hair was still green, the same as ever, and he wore black lipstick, along with rouge. His gaudy attire, and the way he shook his body, were the same as they had been the first time they met him, but she had a feeling something was different.

“Britney.”

Renji didn’t ignore Britney. Actually, the reason he’d come to the office was to report to Britney that he had returned.

Renji placed one hand down lightly on the counter.

“It’s been a while. Have you aged since the last time I saw you?”

“Oh, don’t say that.”

Britney covered his face with his hands.

“I’m sensitive about it. I’ve got a position to consider. Unlike a man like you,

who gets to live wild and free, I have a lot to worry about. ...Especially lately.”

“Ohhh!”

When Yume clapped her hands despite herself, Britney’s eyes widened.

“Wh-Wh-What’s that for, out of nowhere?”

“Oh, yeah. Bri-chan, you’re a lot older than Yume and everyone, huh? Of course...”

“Don’t just say ‘of course’ and look all satisfied! You’re such a rude brat. Honestly now... Huh? You... Wait, what’s going on here?”

Britney looked from Renji, to Adachi, to Ron, to Chibi-chan, and then finally to Yume, counting them on his fingers.

“The number’s right, but the lineup’s changed. Yume, you were in Haruhiro’s party, weren’t you? I hear rumors that Haruhiro’s group is MIA, though.”

“Em eye...”

Yume cocked her head to the side, and blinked repeatedly.

The ground was shaking.

No, apparently Yume was the one shaking.

Chibi-chan came and supported her. Yume had nearly fallen over.

“Sassa’s dead,” Renji said plainly, then, “As for her,” he gestured to Yume with his chin, “We ran into her in the Emerald Archipelago by coincidence. She was acting separately from Haruhiro and the others, apparently.”

Britney shrugged.

“Sounds complicated. I wish you wouldn’t do this to me, especially in an emergency like this...”

“Emergency, you say?” Adachi asked.

“Deadhead fell.”

“What?” Renji asked, furrowing his brow, “How about the Lonesome Field Outpost and Riverside?”

“Those are intact. The Volunteer Soldier Corps is concentrating its power at

Riverside. Lonesome Field Outpost lacks the infrastructure to fight a defensive battle there, so it should be practically abandoned now.”

“Why are you staying behind in Alterna?”

“Because there are volunteer soldiers, like you darlings, who we haven’t been able to track down just yet. Kajiko and Shinohara are both at Riverside, so they’ll manage somehow.”

“Kajiko of the Wild Angels and Shinohara of Orion, huh...?”

Adachi had a difficult look on his face. Yume knew both of them. They were senior volunteer soldiers who led major clans.

“Besides, the Frontier Army only hired me to be the chief of this office.”

Britney produced a knife from out of nowhere, smiling ironically as he spun it around.

“The Volunteer Soldier Corps doesn’t even have a leader. I’m sure you’ve long since figured this out, but as far as Arabakia’s concerned, volunteer soldiers are disposable.”

“The Frontier Army with all its small fry is their main fighting force, huh...”

Ron clicked his tongue in distaste.

The office was unpleasantly quiet. The other volunteer soldiers were looking down in dejection.

Yume knew she should be listening to Britney. She figured this was probably an important talk, but it just wasn’t getting into her head.

“Yume’s gonna get goin’.”

“Hold on, darling.” Britney tried to get her to stop. Yume left the office without hesitating.

After that she walked around to a bunch of places, but she didn’t remember what they were.

The sun was low in the sky at this point. Yume was standing in front of the volunteer soldier lodging house. Come to think of it, her horse-dragon was still tied up back at the office. Should she go back for it? She didn’t feel like it.

“Em eye eh, huh?”

What did that mean? She should’ve asked Britney more about it.

Yeah. It’s not too late. Yume’s gonna go back to the office.

Her legs felt like twigs, and refused to move. Either that, or her feet had sprouted roots. She knew.

The truth was, she’d known since she left the office.

Yume didn’t want to know. What had happened to Haruhiro and the others. She was afraid to find out.

Still, she had to learn. She knew that, too.

She was going to find out eventually either way. She couldn’t remain ignorant. But even if the truth was out there, Yume didn’t have the courage to face it. That’s why she was trying to put it off.

“That’s no good at all, Yume...”

Inside the old lodging house, memories of the days and months she’d spent with her comrades whirled through her head.

Manato had told her once. That of all of them, Yume might just be the bravest.

Boy, had he been overrating her. Yume wasn’t brave at all. She just charged in without really thinking a lot of the time. Basically, she was careless. Yume didn’t have the kind of strength that would let her push onward in spite of her fear. She was spoiled. Weak and frail.

Even now, that weakness still had a home inside Yume.

She wanted to be frank and to the point when she talked. The reason she rambled on despite that must have been because she wanted to have that cushion.

She wanted to be reliable, and yet she didn’t try to take care of things quickly. In the end, did she think she was fine like this? Not at all.

Before it got completely dark, Yume moved away from the lodging house. Yume needed to become strong, and that was what she intended to do. But just

wishing for it wasn't going to make her strong. People could change. Though, not overnight.

"Until she can get strong, Yume's just gonna have to keep on doin' the best she can as weak ol' Yume."

The hunters' guild was in the northern district. Near the north gate. There was a wooden fence around it, and wolf dogs in pens in the yard. The hunters didn't like the hustle and bustle of city life, so it wasn't uncommon for there to only be one person minding the guild. Yume waltzed in without anyone stopping her, and said hi to the wolf dogs inside the pens. All but one of them were unfamiliar to her.

"Hey there, Poochie, long time no see. Did everyone else get taken?"

Poochie licked Yume's fingers through the bars, letting out an adorable whine. Was he always so friendly?

"Oh, maybe it's that. Poochie, have you gotten older? Is that why you're nice now?"

"Hey."

There was a voice from up above.

Y'know, it feels like this's happened before.

When she looked up, there was a bearded man sticking his head out.

"...Huh? You're—"

"Fwoooo!" Yume jumped up. "It's Master! Thank goodness you're at the guild! Because it wouldn't be weird at all if you weren't!"

"No. Hold on, you, where have you... No, when did you... No, what have you been doing all this time...?"

"We've got noodles and noodles to talk about!"

"Don't you mean oodles...?"

"Ooh, yeah, that. Poodles to talk about."

"No, oodles. Well, even if you want to talk about noodles or poodles, that's not that big a deal to me anyway. But hold on, you..."

Suddenly, there was a whine in his voice. What was wrong? Did he catch a cold? Yume's master, the experienced hunter Itsukushima, was sniffing, and rubbing the area around his eyes.

"You're really..."

"Hwuh?"

Yume rubbed her eyes with both hands. She felt moisture. These were tears. Yume learned that she was crying.

Oh.

Itsukushima was crying, too.

Ohhh. Well, Yume's weak. She can't help it. But wait, was Master weak, too? No, that can't be right.

"Sorry, Master. Yume, she was makin' you worry, huh?"

"D-D-D-Don't be stupid! Who'd worry... Well, I was concerned, yeah. I-I mean, I did hear your party had gone MIA, after all. I should say, it's not like I was going around asking people about you or anything, okay? I'm not the type. It's just something I happened to hear naturally."

"Yume's been wantin' to see you, Master. Because it's been such a long time."

"...Y-Yeah. Ah! Th-That's not what I meant just now! It's not like I wanted to see you, and I've been sticking around the guild as much as possible, hoping you'd show up out of the blue. I was just agreeing I haven't seen you in a while..."

"Master's Yume's home, after all."

"I-I'm your... home?"

"Didn't you say it, at the end of basic training? 'You're welcome to come back any time.'"

"...Did I say something like that? Yeah... I guess I did. I do remember, though. For some reason, I always remember our little exchanges. I'm your father... well, something like a father figure to you."

“Yeah. That’s why Yume came home.”

“I see.” Itsukushima nodded a few times, then let out a sigh. “...I see. Welcome home, Yume.”

“Yume’s home, Master.”

“...What happened? If you’d rather not say... if you can’t talk about it, you don’t have to, though.”

“All sorts of stuff. It’d be great to tell you all about it, but where to even begin? Yume doesn’t know.”

“It’s fine. There’s no need to rush. Take your time.” Itsukushima smiled. “Yume. You’re back home, after all.”

She felt like she wanted to cry, and she wanted to take a bath, and she wanted to stuff her face, and she wanted to sleep. Yume was really, really weak. But maybe, now that she had been reunited with Itsukushima, she could be just a little bit stronger. Having seen his face and heard his voice was sure to let her dig in her heels a little harder. Weak, weak Yume needed to build her strength little by little like this.

“For now, I know...”

Itsukushima was touching his face an awful lot as he turned and looked in the opposite direction.

“If you haven’t had dinner yet, let’s eat.”

“Yume’s famished.”

“Okay, I’ll make some—”

Was it Itsukushima or Yume who noticed first? They probably realized at the same time.

Itsukushima let out a surprised, “Uh...?” Yume looked to the north. The hunters’ guild was near the north gate, so the fortress walls that surrounded Alterna towered over them. Though they had never been there before, there were Frontier Army soldiers positioned up there now, preparing to face the enemy. Before she heard the shouting of the soldiers, Yume saw tens of flying lights that seemed to tear through the darkness of the night. Immediately after,

the gruff cries of the soldiers reached her, and the short trails of light fell on this side of the wall.

One of them stuck into the roof of the hunters' guild building. It was burning.

"Flaming arrows?!"

"It's a burnin' arrow!"

In the next instant, the wolf dogs in the pens howled, then they started freaking out. *Clang, clang, clang*, came the peal of the bell. "Enemy attack, enemy attack!" the soldiers on the wall shouted.

"Hold on!" Itsukushima said to Yume, then vanished from the window. He must have been planning to come down. Yume tried to calm the barking wolf dogs. The wolf dogs that were throwing themselves against the pens were too agitated, and she had to scold them for it.

"Ahhh...!" She saw a soldier fall from the walls. Yume wasn't too panicked, and she understood that Alterna was under attack. This was obviously a grave situation. Still, undue panic wasn't going to help.

"Yume!"

Itsukushima came out of the building. He had a bow and quiver on his back, and another set in his hands.

"You don't have a bow, right? Use this."

"Aye, sir!"

Yume took the bow and quiver from Itsukushima. The only other thing she was carrying was a big knife, but that probably wasn't an issue.

There were still more flaming arrows coming over the wall. One or two landed in the yard. One hit the wolf dogs' pen and bounced off. Yume stomped it to put out the fire.

"Master, the way things are goin', don't you think the wolf dogs'll be in danger?"

"There are eight of them here right now. But letting them loose in the streets would be..."

“Let them go. Mrrowr, Yume’s gonna let them out!”

There was no lock, so Yume opened the pens one after another. The wolf dogs all jumped out. While she was doing it, Itsukushima joined in and helped. The wolf dogs wouldn’t listen to Yume before, but when Itsukushima blew his whistle and patted them on their heads, they calmed down in no time. Yume was impressed.

That’s Yume’s master all right.

Yume left Itsukushima in the yard with the wolf dogs as she went and checked the road. There were Frontier Army soldiers heading for the north gate, presumably to join in the battle. She could see volunteer soldiers here and there, too.

“Master!” Yume called out as she headed into the street.

“Right!” Itsukushima replied as he led the wolf dogs to follow her.

The idea of helping the soldiers never crossed her mind. The north gate was screwed. She tried to head south, but there was an incredible noise, which made Yume turn and look despite herself. The north gate was half open. There were soldiers collapsed all over the place.

“They broke through already?!” Itsukushima shouted.

The Frontier Army hadn’t opened the north gate. That was obvious. There was no way they would have. The enemy had found some way to force it open from the outside. That meant they would be flooding in soon. No, not ‘soon.’ The area around the gate had watch fires, and there were lamps on the walls, so even though a number of them had fallen, it was relatively bright there. The big man carrying a greatsword who came through the gate was obviously not human. He was well-built, and had green skin. It was an orc. The orc plowed his greatsword through the back of one fallen soldier. The next to appear wasn’t an orc, but an undead. The undead’s spear skewered a different soldier. The soldiers of the Kingdom of Arabakia’s Frontier Army were looking eager to run. They were in no state to fight back like that.

“Yume, the south gate!”

“Yeah!”

Itsukushima ran, leading the eight wolf dogs, and Yume followed him. The tall building called Tenboro Tower where the margrave lived was in roughly the center of Alterna. The southern district was on the other side of the plaza around it. Itsukushima was heading straight for Tenboro Tower. He was planning to take the shortest route there.

Yume turned to look back, worried about what was happening near the north gate. There was something black rushing towards them from that direction. They looked like four-legged beasts. It was a pack of animals. More than that, one of them, no, it was more than that, several of them were closing in on Yume. Wolves. They were as dark as night.

Black wolves.

She couldn't escape. They'd catch up. The first wolf would pounce on her, and the rest would swarm around. In no time, Yume would be torn up. What should she do? There was no need to think about it.

Yume came to a stop. She breathed in. Breathed out. Then, inhaling once more, she naturally adopted a fighting stance.

The black wolf in the lead was already super close. It would try to bite her throat, or maybe her wrists or ankles. Yume stepped in diagonally, slamming her knife into the black wolf's neck. The black wolf cried out in shock as it went flying. Immediately, another black wolf pounced. Yume used her left hand to push its head down. It was already off the ground, so this didn't require excessive force. The black wolf's head slammed into the ground, making it let out a pained yelp.

"Yume...?!" Itsukushima was shouting. Not nearby. He was some distance away.

If she was being completely honest, Yume wanted to look and see what situation Itsukushima and the wolf dogs were in. But she prioritized handling the black wolves. While she was vanquishing a third and fourth black wolf, the orcs and undead were coming, so she nocked an arrow to her bow. She kicked a black wolf, and loosed the arrow. It pierced through an orc's left cheek. She had been aiming for his forehead, but missed her mark a little. Then she drove her foot into a black wolf's back and propelled herself into the air, and fired her

second arrow through an undead's right eye. The undead immediately plucked the arrow out and came at her. Its weapon was a spear. It thrust at her. It was a stupidly straightforward attack. Yume easily dodged, jumped in close to the undead, and landed a crushing kick on its knee. She nocked an arrow. Turning, she fired. It struck an orc in the throat not fifty centimeters away. Even despite that, the orc roared and swung his battleaxe down at her. Yume planted a forward kick in his solar plexus, then used the opening that kick created to loose another arrow, hitting another orc in the eye. She jumped sideways and rolled, then, rising to one knee, she took another shot with her bow held diagonally. This arrow also hit, striking an undead that was wielding two swords in the chest.

Yume's really hittin'. She's hittin like crazy, huh?

It showed she was able to see well. She felt like she might even have a third or fourth eye. Because of that, she saw it all.

Itsukushima had probably tried to support Yume. But when the enemy closed in, he couldn't get closer to her. Itsukushima and the wolf dogs weren't anywhere around here. They were pretty far away. They'd been separated. Or they were in the process of being separated, at least.

She wanted to chase after Itsukushima, but the orcs and undead were gunning for Yume. It would be too dangerous to turn her back on them to look for him. This was one of those times when she needed to suppress her emotions. The old Yume could never have done it. But the current Yume, she could.

She would prioritize survival. If she didn't get through this, she'd never be able to meet up with Itsukushima.

Yume didn't overextend herself. She just focused on the enemies that came and came. The orcs and undead weren't easy enemies by any means, but they were excited. Overexcited even. Yume, meanwhile, was relatively calm. If she had them beat on that point, she could handle them, so long as there wasn't too great a difference in power.

“...But still!”

Yume dodged a slashing attack from an undead, kicked off a building, and

loosed an arrow. It slammed into the head of one undead that wasn't wearing a helmet with a thwack. Yume tossed her bow and quiver aside in midair, then rolled as soon as she landed. The curved sword of the orc that had been trying to slash her down carved into the cobblestones, sending sparks flying. She had run out of arrows.

Yume stood and drew her knife.

She let out a sigh.

She was sweating harder than she'd thought. Yume had been trying to move away from the north gate as she fought, even if just a little. That had been the hope, but her current position wasn't far from where she started fighting, was it? Well, that was just how these things went. Even if she felt like she was calm, she might not actually be.

Yume didn't care one bit about the Alliance of Kings or the Kingdom of Arabakia, and she had no real desire to oppose the orcs and undead. But when something like this happened, she was left with no choice. There were still volunteer soldiers holding the walls, but the area around the north gate was full of enemies. Yume had no allies around her. Only enemies.

Even at a quick glance, there were ten or so orcs and undead that had loosely encircled her.

Initially, they had probably looked down on Yume, thinking she was just some human woman with nothing but a puny bow. Well, nothing made it easier than being underestimated.

They wouldn't make light of Yume now. They knew she was tougher than she looked. That was why, slowly but surely, they would close the ring around her, then all pummel Yume together. It wouldn't be easy to break out of this. Yume nodded.

"...Okay."

It wouldn't be easy, but it wasn't impossible. It was possible. Her chances might not be good, but they were non-zero. She was going to believe that, and do her best.

Yume switched her knife to her left hand. Holding it with a backhand grip, she

smiled.

This stance, it's just like Haru-kun's, huh?

She brought her right hand forward, turning her palm upward, and beckoned them in. Even if they didn't understand her language, anyone could tell what this gesture meant.

An orc moved forward, but on her right-hand side, not to the front of her. Almost simultaneously, an undead on her left-hand side moved, too. Even if there were ten of them, all ganging up on one person, it wasn't ever really ten on one. They weren't in sync, so if they all rushed her at once, they'd run into their own comrades and cause a traffic jam. Only maybe three or four could attack the same person at once.

Yume went to attack not the orc on her right or the undead on her left, but the orc right in front of her. That orc was holding a big axe in two hands, but he faltered. No matter how many enemies there were, she would poke at the weakest among them and take them apart starting there. Yume meant to find a way to survive.

"Step aside!" The moment she heard that voice, Yume felt her stomach shrivel a little, for some reason.

The voice was speaking the human language. The voice was human. But still, Yume didn't think it belonged to an ally.

The orcs and undead all turned to the north gate in unison. Yume looked that way, too.

There was a man standing a little distance from the ring around her.

His left hand was reaching back over his shoulder, holding a katana with the flat of the blade pressed against his back. She couldn't see a right arm. The man only had one. He was missing his left eye, too. He wasn't a young man.

The orcs and undead backed away, loosening their net. If she ran now, she might get away. No, not a chance. She couldn't do it.

The man was approaching.

"I can see you will be a famous volunteer soldier one day. ...Just kidding."

The man smirked and turned his katana towards Yume.

“I may not look like it, but I like going at it with a tough opponent once in a while. Okay, I say I might not look like it, but I don’t know where you’d be looking to think that. Listen, I won’t say anything about you being a woman, so play with this old man a little while, little lady.”

This might have been one of the fruits of Momohina’s training. Yume could tell that, despite all appearances to the contrary, this man was unbelievably strong. She felt it. Despite the nonchalant way he held his katana, and how he was just standing there casually, he had no openings whatsoever. He was totally relaxed, but still tensed. There was still more than two meters between the man and Yume, but she felt like his katana was at her throat. The man could cut her down whenever he pleased. She couldn’t run away. At some point, Yume’s body seemed to shrink.

Takasagi.

He was human, and yet served Jumbo as a member of Forgan. Did that mean Forgan was the enemy? No, that didn’t matter. She needed to focus. Even if she fought like her life depended on it, there was little chance of her beating this man. All she had was a knife, after all. What was she supposed to do? Nothing was coming to mind. She was out of options before the fight even started.

“...Oh?” Takasagi cocked his head to the side. “Have we met before, young lady? It may be my age showing, but my memory’s not so great these days. I’m sure I’ve seen your face somewhere before, though.”

“You sure have.”

Yume grinned. Takasagi’s right eye widened, as if to say, *“Yeah, I knew it.”*

As she tried to explain when and how they’d met, Yume leaned forward. Even Takasagi seemed a little surprised by that. This wasn’t enough to catch him off guard, but she wanted to do what little she could.

Takasagi was thrusting his katana towards Yume. Yume leaned lower, rushing under his katana, and got in close to Takasagi.

Takasagi didn’t pull his katana in. He didn’t back away, either. There was still the hilt.

He tried to bash Yume in the head with the pommel of his katana.

Yume hadn't anticipated him doing that. Thanks to that, all she could manage was to throw herself to the right and roll in order to evade the pommel.

"Nice. That wasn't bad."

Takasagi tried to kick Yume with his right leg. She was fine with that. Yume had a knife. If she was able to wound Takasagi's foot with this knife, she'd have the advantage.

But Takasagi wasn't trying to kick Yume away. *Bam!* He stepped in vigorously. Here it came. One super-powerful slash.

Yume screamed despite herself as she jumped aside.

She hadn't been cut. Yet.

As she looked, Takasagi shouldered his katana again, cocking his head to the side.

"Yeah, that was a good reaction. You pass. I'll swing for real next time."

She wanted to say something back to him, but the words wouldn't come to her. She couldn't even be entirely sure what stance she was in, or if she was still breathing right. Her whole body was cold, to the point where she had the illusion she was freezing. Scary. Yume was possessed by fear, and cowered. She couldn't let herself be like this. She couldn't.

She couldn't win. Not against this opponent. She didn't have even a one in a million shot. Doing things the normal way wouldn't work.

She needed to resolve herself. To be ready to give him an arm or a leg if that's what it took. No, even that probably wouldn't be enough. At best, she'd take him down with her. Was she just going to die, or die having killed him?

In an instant, she made up her mind. She regretted not having been able to see everyone again, but she wouldn't dwell on it. If she thought about it, it'd dull her response. Even at this point, Yume hadn't thrown away hope. Even if mutual destruction was the best she could hope for, there was still that one in a million, a billion, a trillion chance that she would do better than that. She didn't know how this was going to go until it actually happened.

“It’s time to do this, old man Takasagi.”

“...I knew it. You’re the little lady from back then, huh?”

“It’s not ‘little lady.’ Yume’s got a name, all right?”

“Yeah, you do. Yume. Bring it on.”

Takasagi pulled his katana close to his breast and turned the blade towards her. She held her breath. The only future she could imagine involved her getting cut down.

How about stealing a weapon from one of the orcs or undead around her first? Maybe Takasagi would let her get away with that? No, if Yume took things lightly, Takasagi would be disappointed in her. He’d get mad and exasperated, then give up on Yume. He’d cut her down without mercy.

When they were facing each other like this, there were things she could understand without having to say anything. Despite how he looked, Takasagi was irritated. What had him so angry? This battle, probably. Takasagi wasn’t fighting because he wanted to. He was fighting because he had no choice. He was being made to fight a war that didn’t agree with him.

When Yume opted to drop her knife, Takasagi smiled faintly.

She had to do this. In an instant, she would either be slashed to death, or barely surviving. It didn’t scare her anymore. She had to either get out of the way of his first slash, or take it in a way that left her alive. If she got up close, it wasn’t impossible she’d have some small chance of victory. If it wasn’t impossible, that meant it was definitely possible.

As Yume advanced without hesitation, Takasagi moved his katana.

“Behold my secret technique.”

It floated, or perhaps fluttered, like it was dancing.

What’s that? It’s a mystery.

“Fall Haze.”

It felt like she could see the blade, but also couldn’t. She didn’t get it. Was it fast, or was it slow? Even that was unclear. Yume headed towards Takasagi. She

couldn't stop. If she did, she'd either be run through, or slashed. It was too dangerous to jump in, but she couldn't turn back, either. It had to be the way he was moving. Takasagi's katana was mesmerizing Yume. It was entrancing, inviting. The way things were going, she would be cut down without being able to do anything about it. It wouldn't be long now. Yume would die driven by fear, yet moved that such a beautiful sword could exist.

"Personal Skill!"

The sudden shout made her feel like someone had scolded her, "*What're you going to die like that for, you idiot?*" It wasn't just a voice. It fell from the heavens like a shooting star.

"Great Foul Waterfall...!"

The shooting star collided with Takasagi's secret technique. No, the shooting star had a katana. That katana struck Takasagi's katana.

"Ngh...!"

Takasagi was thrown backwards and, adjusting his grip on his katana as he nearly lost it, he instantly made a horizontal slash.

"Why you...!"

"You're losing it, old man!"

The shooting star—no, obviously it wasn't a shooting star, it was a person, and a human, probably, but they were dressed oddly, wearing a tattered cloak and this weird, funny mask. That voice, a man's voice, sounded familiar to Yume, even though it was really hoarse right now. She probably, no, almost definitely knew who it belonged to. But if that was true, what in the world was going on here?

Takasagi was a member of Forgan. Forgan was attacking Alterna. So, yeah, if the masked man was who Yume thought he was, it wasn't that strange for him to be here. He'd joined Forgan. Leaving Yume and the others. To be honest, Yume didn't think he'd betrayed them. He wasn't a trustworthy individual, but she still believed in him. She wanted to have faith. Sure he could be crazy at times. But he was still her comrade. They'd been together a long time. They went through a lot, too. All sorts of things happened. He was a precious friend.

But despite that, he went away.

Maybe that was just how things worked out. Maybe he'd had no other choice. That, or maybe he'd seen something in Forgan that Yume hadn't. He may have needed them that badly. He was always dissatisfied somehow, and constantly complaining. Was he unable to read the room? Or did he just choose not to? When they had a good vibe going, he'd say things like, *"Come on, people, are you really okay like that? Do you seriously think things are alright like this? Well, not me,"* and stir them up. He'd push them away, saying, *"I'm not here to make friends. Don't be stupid,"* but he would still act awfully lonely, and Yume felt like he cared for his comrades in his own way. Was she mistaken? Had Yume misjudged him? She wanted to ask. She wanted him to set her straight.

Did you end up hatin' Yume and everyone? Don't you care about Yume and the others anymore?

"That's not it," she felt like he'd say. *"It's not about love or hate. Those emotions don't move me. I'm a man who aims higher than that. Don't lump me in with you mediocre people. It's not like I hate you or anything."*

What was he doing here? Was it really him?

"Orah, orah, orah, orahhh...!"

The masked man was trading blows with Takasagi. His swings looked flashy and excessive, but far from it, they were well refined. The man moved his katana freely and creatively, like he was wielding a great brush to paint some incredible masterpiece.

"Damn... it...!"

The Takasagi was being pushed back. Perhaps he was only making it look that way, but he was on the defensive. Yume noticed. Takasagi was a brilliant master swordsman, but he had weaknesses, too. If an attack came from below the hip on his left-hand side, he was a little, even if only slightly, slower to react to it. The masked man didn't keep attacking him there. He mixed in other attacks meant to keep Takasagi in check, strong blows to other areas, and then, occasionally, when he decided it was time, he'd take advantage of Takasagi's weaknesses. The masked man wasn't just incredible with a sword. That wouldn't have been enough to keep Takasagi on the ropes like this. The masked

man was intimately familiar with Takasagi.

“Oorah!”

The masked man went for a low strike to Takasagi’s left, and Takasagi, clicking his tongue, somehow managed to deflect it. Then the masked man accelerated, like a switch had just been flipped.

“Personal Skill! Flying Lightning God...!”

The names of his skills were nonsensical, but she could tell it was a thrust. The masked man was holding his katana in both hands. It was a two-handed thrust. There was an incredible whooshing noise. Not just once. It was a repeated thrust. But to Yume’s eyes, it all looked like one.

“Ohhh?! Ohhhh...?!”

How had Takasagi managed to survive it? Yume didn’t know. Whatever it was, he backed away while diverting the katana and twisting his body out of the way of all the thrusts. It still resulted in Takasagi falling flat on his backside.

Now, he could finish him.

If the masked man was the person Yume knew, he probably wouldn’t do it.

She was right.

The masked man withdrew his katana, resting the flat of the blade on his shoulder.

“Get up, old man.”

Takasagi stood up, as he was told, then let out a truly hearty laugh.

“You just pop up everywhere I go now, don’t you? You sure can run your mouth now, Ranta.”

“You...! Don’t say it! I’m hiding my face for a reason...!”

“It’s obvious, and you know it.”

“N-No, it’s not!”

The masked man glanced towards Yume. Yume wanted to call his name. Again and again, to be sure it was him. But she felt like she couldn’t now. If they were

alone, she might have embraced him instead, but unfortunately they were surrounded by enemies. But Yume wasn't alone anymore. He was here. Her comrade. Her friend. If she was with Ranta, she could absolutely get out of this crisis. Because Ranta was ridiculously stubborn. That was one thing she could trust him on without it feeling forced.



Afterword

I feel like I've been writing all this time without really getting who Yume is. I mean, I like people who I don't quite get, so I'm sure that's why I've written her like that. Still, Yume must have things going on in her own way, and, well, being the kind of girl she is, it's probably all sorts of vague, and there may be more than a few parts of it that she doesn't get either, but, you know, she has a definite core, even if she doesn't seem to. There probably isn't anyone who has absolutely no core. As far as I've observed, I don't think there is. So Yume must have something, and we've seen glimpses of it before now, but I've started to feel like Yume wants to avert her eyes from whatever it is. By the way, I'm not the kind of person who can think, "Just what kind of person am I? I dunno," without agonizing over it that much. I accept that, "I've been like this up till now, and these are the kind of things I've done, so this is the kind of person I am," and don't really doubt that. I've faced a variety of situations, and it's rare that I find myself surprised by my reactions. Even if I do something strange, I accept that that's just the kind of person I am.

Yume is the kind of girl who's pretty tolerant of herself and others, but it seems like she was frustrated in some way with how vague she herself was. Though she had the drive to move forward without much hesitation, her sense of direction wasn't all that sharp, so she didn't know which way she should be going. It left her always vaguely wondering, "Is this way okay?" She wasn't negative, but she wasn't positive, either. She didn't know if she was facing forwards or backwards, and maybe she didn't even want to know. She wanted to make things clear, but, at the same time, wanted to keep them fuzzy. But it's not like she was thinking, "I'm fine as I am. I should stay like this forever," either. I wonder how Yume will turn out from here. That's what I was thinking as I wrote this short story. I hope you enjoyed it.

By the way, this marks the 100th volume I've released where I am the sole author. My first book came out in 2004, so it must have been a long road to get here, but it doesn't feel like it at all. I feel like I'll keep at it like this forever until,

by the time I notice it, I'll have vanished from this world.

Now then, to my editor, Harada-san, to the illustrator, Eiri Shirai-san, to the designers of KOMEWORKS among others, to everyone involved in production and sales of this book, and finally to all of you people now holding this book, I offer my heartfelt appreciation and all of my love. Now, I lay down my pen for today.

I hope we will meet again.

Ao Jyumonji

Bonus Short Stories

Scene #20: What Lies at the End of Just Right

All right, let's see what you can do...

Since it was Golden Week, the family had taken the Shinkansen and gone on a little vacation. There was a little time before they would be taking the train back, so they decided to get something to eat while they waited, and that was how they ended up coming to this place.

The name of the restaurant was a little odd, but it apparently had something to do with Dazai Osamu, an author Monzo was familiar with. Dazai was a native of Aomori, and this place was in the commercial area connected to Shin-Aomori Station. Monzo had eaten enough at the hotel's breakfast buffet to make the other customers look at him funny, and pushed the limits of what he could consume for lunch, too, so he was in the mood for something uncharacteristically light. He settled on shijimi ramen.

Hmm, maybe I should have gone for niboshi ramen instead. No, if I'm going to have niboshi, it has to be at Naki in Golden-gai. This place has a pretty solid menu, though, huh? The set meals look good, too. I know my stomach is a bit exhausted, but was it cowardly of me to settle for shijimi ramen? I always want to push myself when it comes to food...

While he was thinking about it, the shijimi ramen arrived. The restaurant was pretty crowded, almost at capacity, but it came fast despite that.

Oh, I like that. Having it come out quickly. Ramen should come out fast, and be eaten fast, too. The chef's skill is important, as well, so, okay, it's not all about speed. If they do their work slowly and thoroughly, that can be good, too...

First, he took a sip of soup.

"This is..."

He spoke without intending to.

...This. It's so...

Monzo covered his eyes with his left hand.

Before now... I didn't know. Didn't know anything. All this time... Not one thing...

IT'S A SHIJIMI.

Or rather, THIS IS SHIJIMI.

No, THIS IS *THE* SHIJIIIIIMIIII.

The taste of shijimi... It's deep... This... This is truly nutritious and delicious...

Monzo was in high school. Naturally, as a minor, he didn't drink alcohol, so this was only his imagination, but this would probably taste unbelievably good after a stiff drink.

I can feel it...

The shijimi nutrients slid down his esophagus, reaching his stomach, where they were absorbed through its walls, and spread to cells throughout his body. He more than just felt it. He almost had to wonder if he'd just taken a hit of some crazy drug. It was like he was getting healthier by the second. But more than that, it was delicious. Beyond delicious.

Whew... This stuff... I'm beat. Just beat. I surrender...

He looked around the restaurant. There was a sign kindly informing him that, if the taste was too strong, he could dilute it with more broth. But there was no need. Though, it was certainly true that it might have been a little salty.

But it's just right... Just right. There's probably nothing more "right" in the whole world. Just right...

It didn't overstate itself. The noodles were good, too. Just right. The more he drank the soup, and the more he slurped the noodles, the more he felt himself swimming in that ocean of "just right"-ness. It was just right.

This level of "just right" deserves four stars...

The Michelin Guide only went up to three stars, but Monzo sometimes

recognized a fourth star. It was just right. Who knew that “just right” could be such a wonderful thing? Monzo didn’t. It was just right. This was something he wanted more of. He wanted it like crazy now.

If this place were in my neighborhood...

He’d be a regular.

He would come here at least once a week, seeking this “just right” flavor. Its rightness would reset his senses, and with that, he would be able to enjoy all sorts of other flavors all the more.

The Sin of Paradise

This is it. This feeling. Morning in Golden-gai is great...

There were long buildings, row houses, densely packed along either side of a street that was thin enough to be called an alley. Incredibly, in this one little corner of town, there were close to 300 businesses. Because most of them were bars, or other establishments that served alcohol, at this time of day the area was naturally a little deserted. That was what allowed a high school student like Monzo to set foot here without feeling too intimidated.

Monzo didn’t know Golden-gai at night. He had only seen it in images found on TV, in magazines, and on the internet, but the smell of that place, its essence lingered, and he felt like he had become a little more mature just by being there.

Oh! There. There it is.

Monzo found the place he was looking for, opened the door, and climbed the steep stairs. When he responded to the staff’s greeting and tried to take a seat, he was told to buy a meal ticket from the vending machine.

“Oh! Sorry!”

Right, right. I always get that wrong...

He was given the option of amazing niboshi tsukemen or amazing niboshi ramen, and struggled to decide which, but he ultimately settled on amazing niboshi ramen, like always. Obviously, the tsukemen was hard to pass up.

Ordering both was an option, too, but Monzo had a general policy of one dish each time he came to a restaurant. It was only the polite thing to do, to focus all of his being on thoroughly savoring a single bowl of ramen.

When he handed over the meal ticket, the staff member asked if he had any preferences. This was another vexing question. If he had to say one way or the other, he did have preferences. However, Monzo was the type who could enjoy any food, so long as it was delicious. He was also of the belief that the taste a restaurant provided to customers who made no specific requests would undoubtedly be their best.

“I’ll have it normal.”

After that, it was just a matter of subtly watching the staff prepare his order as he waited. Even though it was a Saturday, because of the time of day, Monzo was the only one here. Incredibly, this place ran 24-7, and thanks to that, he was able to enjoy this kind of luxury. Marvelous.

Ohhh...! Here it comes! Here it comes! Here it comes!

The flow of time here was mysterious. It felt like an eternity had passed before his ramen was complete, or perhaps it was only a moment. It felt sweet, and yet unbearable. When Monzo received his order from the staff and placed it on the table, he took his chopsticks in hand, and brought his hands together.

“Thank you for the meal.”

He wanted to shout out loud, but he couldn’t do something so disrespectful. He scooped up some broth with his porcelain soup spoon, and sipped it.

...Niboshi! It’s niboshi! A perfect niboshi revolution...!

Next, he tried the noodles.

...Yes! This chewy texture! It’s incredible! The flavor of the niboshi is wrapped around it, and they’ve become one. I don’t know what to say...

Tears formed in his eyes. Sweat was already forming on the tip of his nose and his brow. Monzo wiped his tears with a tissue.

This ramen has more than one type of noodles, huh...?

There were ittanmen, a sort of wide, sheet-like noodles in it. They had a

unique texture, too.

Okay, let's take the first ittan slow...

He slurped it into his mouth.

“Ohh...!”

He groaned in delight despite himself.

That's good! This is... delicious! No, not just delicious, this is destiny!

The chashu pork in this place was delectable, too. It wasn't the type where the surrounding flavors had seeped into it, but was so fatty as to be a sensual experience, and was delicious as meat on its own.

Okay, now the chashu...

He stuffed it into his mouth.

Paradise...

He wanted a whole hunk of this meat. If he had that, he felt like not only could he survive the end of the world itself, but he could become king of the post-apocalyptic wasteland.

It's all delicious. This is a sin. It's deeply sinful...

As he intently slurped noodles, ate the ittanmen and chashu, and drank the soup, Monzo began to become uneasy. Would there ever be a greater happiness in his life than what he felt now? It was so intensely delicious that his mind went beyond pure bliss to imagining the tragic fate that might await him.

Scene #22: At the North Station

Monzo had only been to that ramen place once. It was on a trip. Monzo's parents loved ramen, too, so visiting that place had been one of the objectives of their trip.

Never again.

That ramen place, called Station, had closed down.

He hardly remembered how it had looked from the outside, or what the

interior was like, but this much was certain: he had ordered miso ramen.

This ramen is amazing...

The moment he saw the miso ramen he had ordered, young Monzo was shocked. The soup looked like jelly since there was a layer of fat formed on the surface.

Hot...!

He took a sip, and it was unbelievably hot. Stars shot out of his eyes. He remembered whining, “I can’t eat this,” to his parents. His father told him, “Wait until it cools,” but it was coated with a layer of fat, so the temperature wasn’t going down in a hurry. This place was in the far north, in a chilly region of the country. Maybe that was why they developed a ramen that wouldn’t get cold.

Whatever the case, it took a long time before he could start eating. His parents suggested putting some in a separate dish, but Monzo firmly refused. Even at a young age, he wanted to eat his ramen directly from the bowl. To Monzo, that’s just the kind of dish ramen was.

When he was finally able to eat, Monzo polished off that miso ramen in no time flat.

I’ve never eaten something like this before..!

It was intense. It tasted of all five flavors: sweet, salty, sour, spicy, and umami. If there were a sixth flavor, richness, Station’s miso ramen had it in spades. What went into it? How was it made? These questions were beyond the young Monzo. However, the rich, deep, broad flavor just kept coming at him.

Miso! Miso! This is miso! What is miso soup? That’s not miso! This! This is miso! This is the real miso...!

Monzo loved the miso soup that his mother made, filled with many other ingredients. But now that he had tasted this miso ramen, miso soup was just too weak for him. How could it be so weak? Miso soup was no way to use miso. If it wasn’t miso ramen, it didn’t even deserve to be called miso. Here was the miso truth. The world is made of miso. In the beginning, there was miso, and miso made the world. God was dead. Miso was the all-knowing, all-powerful

god of this world.

This is what the word delicious was created to describe!

He clearly remembered thinking that.

Monzo had loved ramen for as long as he could remember, but after eating the miso ramen at Station, his love for ramen truly awakened. He realized there were so many ramen places in the world, and every time he saw one, he wondered. What flavor of ramen do they serve? What type? No, no, it might not even be a type you could categorize. He came to think about these things 24-7. The miso ramen at Station was Monzo's awakening.

Again and again, Monzo begged his parents to take him to Station for ramen again.

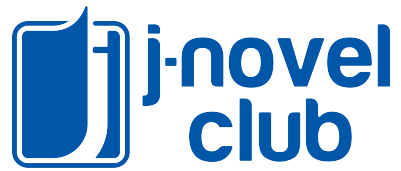
But it wasn't the sort of place they could drive to on the weekend. It was in a town they would have to take a plane across the sea to reach. Monzo's family was not especially poor, but they weren't especially wealthy, either, and there was also his parents' work to consider, so they could only manage one small family trip each summer.

Before they could make it back up there, Station closed.

He could never taste that miso ramen again, but there were a number of ramen places in the same tradition as Station.

Next time, Monzo intended to visit one of them.

Hopefully, he would be able to encounter that miso ramen once more.



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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash: Volume 14++

by Ao Jyumonji

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